ĐẠO MÂU RELIGIOUS PRACTICES:
THE SOFT POWER AND EVERYDAY LIVES OF WOMEN
IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The Đạo Mẫu is a folk religion without the necessity of theology, ethics, a structured organization, and formal membership requirements. Its focus is on ritual performed to secure the support of the spirits to gain good fortune, health, or wealth. This dissertation has sought to understand through personal interviews and participant observations the lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women especially those called to beдрес and đọng thầy. How does the practice of Đạo Mẫu affect their lives, and become a source of empowerment to help them better cope with the problems of everyday lives? This empowering effect is at once the source of the happiness of these women, and the reason for this religious persistence as a vital force in Vietnamese society. It comes from involvement with other women and the development of networks of encouragement and support - a sisterhood, coming through spirit possession during the lên đọng ritual ceremony. The lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women, imbued with ceremony, is a world of obligations. Each individual is a nexus of obligations that produce and are reproduced through ritual processes. Within the nexus, there is no recognized room for exercising that aspect of the self or the agency of willing, the inner self so to speak. However, by performing the ritual and actualizing the outer forms that is the obligation, one is enabled to “go beyond the norm” to surpass the bounds of ritual form and to realize an inner self in its agency, an experience or exercise which we call “soft power”. This soft power is not about compliance, nor submission, nor resistance, nor total conformity but a capacity for self-actualization. This study suggests the soft power approach by which Đạo Mẫu empowers women is a viable way of bringing about change through personal development, an approach which fits the culture of Vietnam without the overthrow of traditional values and the social dislocation this brings.
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1.1. Introduction

There was a small temple full of people. Everyone was out in the courtyard in front of the temple. They were rushing around trying to pick up some small bills being thrown by a female dancer on the center stage inside the temple. Some of the people were even standing up and dancing. The female dancer was dressed in the garb of a highland girl with a dark green skirt and an indigo blouse embroidered with silver flowers. She wore silver necklaces and silver earrings. Two older women sitting beside her were giving her burning torches. She held three torches in each hand. While she danced she used the torches to tease the audience, pretending to hand them the torches but then pulling them away when someone from the audience tried to take them. The music was very lively and the singer was singing faster and faster. People were waving their hands and laughing and saying to the dancer: “My Lady, you are so beautiful!” , “My Royal Damsel, you are dancing so lithely and gracefully!”

This is one of the most lively and joyful spirit incarnations during a Đạo Mẫu ritual at master medium Vy’s temple in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam where I first experienced Đạo Mẫu belief and practice in 1999. There have been many social, historical, economic, political and cultural changes in contemporary Vietnam as the result of modernizing and globalizing processes in this post-revolutionarily socialist country. But there are still traditional beliefs and values which persist in the present day. One of these is the worship of the Mother Goddess--- the Đạo Mẫu.
My primary interest is on the role of Vietnamese women in society and sources of empowerment of these women. In the process of doing some studies of Đạo Mẫu, a traditional folk religion in Vietnam centered on the worship of the Mother Goddess, I became interested in the women of the Đạo Mẫu as a subset of the women in Vietnam. This is a religion where women predominate—as worshippers, objects of worship and as religious masters. My preliminary studies also indicated this was a folk religion that has a significant impact on the empowerment of women. A study focusing on who these women are and how the religion empowers these women seems timely and worthwhile.

This then is the focus of my dissertation: an ethnographic study of the women of Đạo Mẫu, and the impact of the Đạo Mẫu on these women. The dissertation aims to understand who the women of Đạo Mẫu are and how the practice of this religion affects their lives, and becomes a source of empowerment to help them better cope with the problems of daily life. I believe that the worship of the Đạo Mẫu through the participation of the devout believer as well as the casual believer in the rituals and ceremonies of the folk religion has an empowering effect on these individuals which helps them cope with the problems of everyday lives. This empowering effect is at once the source of the happiness of these women, and the reason for this religious persistence as a vital force in Vietnamese society.

The longer term goal of the dissertation is that by better understanding the role of these women and the dynamics of how Đạo Mẫu impacts their lives as an empowering force, we can go on to study the larger population to identify other sources of empowerment and come to a better understanding of how these elements work on the larger population of women. This would then provides a means to better understand
issues of gender identity and how women can be empowered to play a role in the modernization and globalization of Vietnam.

In contemporary Vietnam, cultural ideals are articulated and rearticulated by the state ideology that women in traditional roles help to maintain the social order. The state ideology regards these aspects of women’s roles as the cultural and social key to mediate a transitioning society. Under a lot of pressure of cultural and social expectations, women respond in different ways. On the one hand they show their conformity with these expectations or the social order. On the other hand, they find ways to address and exercise their personal needs in ways that go beyond the norms of everyday social order.

Much of the Western discourse in anthropology has developed around Foucaultian notions of power with a focus on forms of resistance. Of these, James Scott’s accounts of resistance theorize how subaltern people, particularly peasants, create forms of resistance in their encounters with government ideologies (Scott 1979, 1985). Applying Scott’s theory to the ways Đạo Mẫu women encounter and deal with their government’s propaganda about women, we would describe the women’s traditional ways of doing things to create and maintain the social order in society as urged in the propaganda, then show all the ways that Vietnamese women resist that ideology. As we will see, the word resistance, as used by Scott, does not accurately describe the experiences of ordinary women in Vietnam, much less the women of Đạo Mẫu. Does this mean that Vietnamese women slavishly actualize the government ideology about the role

\footnote{The government ideology regarding to these aspects of the women addresses them as being heroic with an indomitable spirit in war as well as being loyal, grateful and able to do everything in modern everyday life (“Anh hùng, Bất khuất, Trung hậu, Đảm đang” (8/3/1965) or “being good at work and able to do everything at home” (“Giỏi việc nước, đảm việc nhà” (1989) to mediate the transitioning society.}

\footnote{For additional information on this account, see Belanger and Barbieri 2009.}
of women in society? The answer to this question I leave to the reader after considering
what I have to say on the matter. Although I have been much influenced by now-current,
somewhat trendy Western discourses on power and resistance, my task with regard to the
women of Vietnam, and in particular the women of Đạo Mẫu, takes a slightly different
tack toward understanding the roles of power and resistance in their lives. With my focus
on Đạo Mẫu women’s experience in their encounter with the state ideology, which is
deeply insinuated in the social and cultural expectations of everyday social norms and
values, we ask how these women actually do encounter, experience, make sense of,
shape, and as I hope to show, in effect live a life beyond those ideological expectations of
their quotidian experience by the way they participate in Đạo Mẫu religion and ritual.

This study will show that Vietnamese women, particularly the women associated
with Đạo Mẫu, respond to their living conditions in different ways. Well short of what
Scott calls resistance (1985, 1990) and in ways that are likely everybit as self-satisfying
and in the more positive sense, self-actualizing, the Đạo Mẫu belief and ritual practice
provide not only the principle way for women to manifest, experience, produce and
reproduce the social norm but also obviate the norm by going ahead of it by self-
actualizing themselves in socially collective and communal encounters with the spirit
world. In place of “resistance” I suggest the concept of “obviation” (with all of its
semantic ambiguity) and call this a form of “soft power”. The Đạo Mẫu women in this
study make efforts to fulfill the social and cultural expectations while exercising soft
power in ways that allow them to self-actualize in their own ways. Thus, the women’s
way of responding to their living conditions is a form of soft power. Given Foucautian
categories of power, soft power corresponds to none of them—it is not compliance, nor
submission, nor resistance, nor total conformity. It is a capacity of self-actualization. The concept of soft power is difficult to describe without a lot of subtlety about these women’s experiences. There is no simple, easy definition of it. A word like resistance which is used very often in American anthropology does not reach the level of subtlety necessary to grasp the experience of these women. The concept of soft power does not correspond to any of the Western or Foucaultian categories of power, although it can be seen in the context of Foucault’s notion that power always forms a field of relationships. It seems that soft power in some ways pervades that field. This will be the guiding thread of my dissertation.

Taken as a whole, my approach attempts to go beyond the particular Western concepts by engaging notions of power, albeit spurred by Western analytics, with a Vietnamese understanding of things. On the other hand, other Western analytics such as those of Victor Turner, Roy Rappaport, and Johan Huizinga may be applied more directly, engaging them with ethnographic data to explain the lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women through their religious practices.

The data for this research draws from twelve months of intensive ethnographic investigation of a group of Đạo Mẫu women and their families in Hanoi and Thai Nguyen. The field research includes visits to the neighborhoods of my interviewees. In addition, I made short visits to other locations along the route of religious pilgrimages made by worshippers in Northern Vietnam where there are large concentrations of Đạo Mẫu practitioners. These locations included the cities and villages of: Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, Hung Yen, Ha Nam, Bac Giang and Lang Son. Interviews were conducted with worshippers and villagers in these places.
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6: Receiving “Spirit Money”
7: Châu Văn musicians and singers
1.2. Đạo Mẫu and the Study of Đạo Mẫu

1.2.1. Roots of Đạo Mẫu

Đạo Mẫu is a folk religion focused on the performances of certain rituals to please the spirits. These rituals are centered on the beliefs in a dông (a religious master) as the bridge between this phenomenal world and the other or spiritual world of goddesses of nature, deified heroes and heroines, and ancestral spirits. The Đạo Mẫu belief and practice appear to have been part of traditional Vietnamese culture for centuries and may have antecedents in prehistory. It is possible that it had its roots in the worship of the spirits of nature, and then evolved into the worship of spirits with anthropomorphic characteristics---gods and goddesses of the specific forces of nature, then of historic figures who were deified and honored for heroic or ethical deeds. The pantheon of deities worshipped is extensive and now numbers close to 70 identifiable deities (Ngô Đức Thịnh [1994] 2007).

Most of the Đạo Mẫu worshippers are women, most of the dông are women, and the deities worshipped are mostly feminine---the most important of which is the Mother Goddess as the original cosmic mother. It is a religion with no official scripture, no elaborate organization of dông, and no superstructure---temples are plain affairs, and ritual ceremonies can be performed in other temples if a dedicated temple to the Mother Goddess is not available.

There is no evidence of the exact time that the Đạo Mẫu religion was established. During the colonial and postcolonial periods (from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century), it was viewed as a form of shamanism (Maurice Durand 1959), or as an indigenous religious belief of Vietnamese (Giran 1912, Cadie`re 1955). Recently,
many Vietnamese researchers (Vũ Ngọc Khánh 1991, Đặng Văn Lung 1991, 2004, Nguyễn Minh San 1993 and Ngô Đức Thịnh [1994] 2007) have considered the worship of the mother goddess as a folk religion. The worship of the Mother Goddess is called Đạo Mẫu, to distinguish it from the worship of General Trần Hùng Đạo called Đạo Thánh Trần as well as from the spirit worshipping (Đạo Thánh) from which it derived. They have argued that worship of the Đạo Mẫu has roots in the prehistoric worship of natural forces by the indigenous residents of Vietnam. However, no one can really provide historical evidences to support that claim. Therefore, the origins of the Đạo Mẫu still remain unclear.

Ngô Đức Thịnh (1994) and Đặng Văn Lung (1991) were among the first scholars to use the name Đạo Mẫu or the Mother Goddess religion. They suggest that this religion stems from the indigenous belief of worshiping spirits and female deities as creative and protective resources for people living in an agricultural society. It is believed among worshippers that the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh or the Mother Goddess of Heaven is the Supreme Deity of Đạo Mẫu and the lên dòng ritual or spirit possession is the main practice of Đạo Mẫu. The performance of this ritual is important to the Vietnamese because it reflects the traditional values of giving thanks and acknowledging one’s obligations to the spirits and the family and society for help provided, and receiving good fortune through the power of the spirits when human efforts are not enough.

According to Ngô Đức Thịnh (1994, 2006, and 2008) Đạo Mẫu evolved from a cult worshipping female deities (Túc thờ Nữ thần) to worshiping the Mother Goddess (Túc thờ Mẫu) to the Mother Goddess Religion of the Three/Four Palaces (Đạo thờ Mẫu

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3 For a good account on Đạo Thánh Trần, see Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2006: 34-40).
Tam phủ/Tứ phủ or Đạo Mẫu). The name “Religion of the Four Palaces” reflects the cosmology of the Vietnamese— a belief in a reality of four Palaces: a Palace of Heaven (thiên phủ), a Palace of Earth (địa phủ), a Palace of Upland Forests (nhạc phủ) and a Palace of Water (thủy (thoại) phủ). It is also called the “Three Palaces religion” (Đạo Tam phủ) based on a belief in a cosmos with a Palace of Heaven, a Palace of Upland Forests, and a Palace of Water. Each Palace is governed by a Mother Goddess spirit. The Mother Goddess of the Nine Heavens (Thánh Mẫu Cửu Thiên) governs the Palace of Heaven. The Mother Goddess of Earth (Mẫu Địa) governs the Palace of Earth. The Mother Goddess of Upland Forests (Thánh Mẫu Thượng Ngàn) governs the Palace of Upland Forests and the Mother Goddess of Water (Mẫu Thọại) governs the Palace of Water (See figure 2).
Figure 2: The Hạng Trống Folk Paintings
1: The Religion of the Four Palaces (Đạo Tứ Phụ) Governed by Four Mother Goddesses
2: The Religion of the Three Palaces (Đạo Tam Phụ) Governed by Three Mother Goddesses
3: The Cult of General Trần Hưng Đạo (Đạo Thánh Trần)
The worship of the Mother Goddess has persisted strongly over time in Vietnam. However, many of the manifestations of the Goddess and the practices of the religion—the spiritual incarnations and forms of worship and the role of worshippers and of the temple leader have changed. These changes reflect changing political and social needs, adaptations to local beliefs and the interpretations of scholars. But the core belief, that there is a spiritual world beyond life governed by a Mother Goddess, and the ritual practices of providing offerings to show respect and to commemorate the spirits and to gain merit and receive benefits from spirits—all these things have remained. Đạo Mẫu has shown itself to be both vibrant and steadfast in its traditions. Thus is Đạo Mẫu able to maintain relevance in the lives of many ordinary people despite political and social changes, and thus does Đạo Mẫu demonstrate its strength and flexibility.

1.2.2. Influence of State Authority on Đạo Mẫu

The attitude toward Đạo Mẫu and religion in general of the state or civil authority has changed in the course of Vietnamese history. Đạo Mẫu rose in importance as rulers of state power sought the sanction of the religion to justify their suppression or conquest of people(s) by deifying certain ancestors and making them part of the pantheon of spirits which encompass the Mother Goddess. During the premodern period, a time marked by a centralized Confucian patriarchy, the beliefs and rituals of the religion were seen as marginal and were suppressed rather than supported. The suppression of heterodox cults, such as worshipping the Mother Goddess, was documented in legal codes in the sixteenth and nineteenth century in Vietnam (the Le Code and Gia Long Code, respectively) (Taylor 2004: 9, Norton 2009: 21-23).
In the colonial period, scholars and civil authorities focused on aspects of local religious practices like shamanism and female possession as a potential threat to the ruling authority of the colonial government over the local people (Hailly 1866, Richard 1928 (1868), and Diguet 1906). While some others such as Cadiere (1992 [1955]) and Giran (1912) valued this religion as “an original production of the religious thought of the Vietnamese” or a “true religion of the Vietnamese,” other scholars and writers during this colonial and postcolonial time criticized these and other beliefs as being superstitious and nonsensical practices that should not be practiced since, they argued, they are harmful and denigrate the national values and development (Phan Ker Binh 1913, Long Chuong 1942, and Nhât Lang 1952).

In the socialist period (from the late twentieth century to the present), there was a shift from the official ideology of the early state formed in 1945 to the new official ideology implemented since the advent of the Đổi mới (Renovation) period in 1986. In the early part of this period, the socialist authority neither acknowledged shamanism or female possession nor approved of Đạo Mẫu (or any other religion). These were viewed as bad traditions or superstitious practices (Hồ Chí Minh 1958). However, since Đổi Mới, despite the views of the communist party that lên đồng ritual—the main ritual of Đạo Mẫu, is superstitious, Vietnamese folklore scholars legitimate lên đồng in nationalist and cultural terms (Norton 2009: 51).

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4 Đổi mới (Renovation) initiated in Vietnam in 1986 as the official reform beginning with the adoption of a market-oriented economic system. As a result of Đổi mới privately-owned enterprises were permitted in commodity production (and later encouraged) by the Communist Party of Vietnam; furthermore, the push to collectivize the industrial and agricultural sectors of Vietnam, previously the focus of intense efforts by the Communist authorities, was abandoned.
Recently, a new differentiation between “superstitious lơn dòng” and a “non-superstitious/rational lơn dòng” has been created to allow this traditional practice to gain recognition by the government as part of the cultural heritage of Vietnamese people. This official recognition only extends to the practice of lơn dòng and not to other allied practices. As recently as September 2010, the Vietnamese government clarified the issue of recognition by promulgating 75/2010/ND-CP Decree to prohibit all superstitious forms of lơn dòng. Anyone caught doing superstitious lơn dòng practices would be required to pay a fine of 1,000,000 - 3,000,000 VND. The debate on what is superstitious lơn dòng and what is non-superstitious lơn dòng is ongoing although the Decree has been in effect since September 1, 2010.

1.2.3. **Resilience of Đạo Mẫu in Academic Accounts**

Despite the ongoing issue of state sanction of the Đạo Mẫu and its practices, the ritual observances and belief in the Mother Goddess continue in the ordinary life of ordinary people in Vietnam. The Đạo Mẫu continues like a stream which is beneath the surface of the earth, even as scholars and officials try to deal with it as a surface stream. The ordinary people continue to practice their beliefs and rituals whether they can do so publicly or whether they do so furtively. Thus, the question on why Đạo Mẫu has persisted from the past to the present has been one of the main concerns of scholars. Scholars and researchers inside and outside of Vietnam have focused on different aspects of Đạo Mẫu to explain its persistence, particularly its resurgence in present day Vietnam and its potential role in the modernization and globalization of Vietnam.

Although there is no statistical evidence, researchers (Fjelstad 1995, Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996, Nguyễn Thị Hiện 2001, Taylor 2004) and Đạo Mẫu worshippers
(interviewed as part of this research) state that the majority of Đạo Mẫu participants are women. In the first half of the twentieth century, scholars (Dumoutier 1908, Phan Kế Bính 1987 [1913/1914], Giran 1912 and Duran 1959) observed that male mediums belonged to the “cult” of General Trần Hưng Đạo while female mediums worshipped the spirits of the Three Palaces (Đạo Tam Phủ), with each “palace” headed by a mother spirit (Norton 2009:24). This however is not to say that Đạo Mẫu is a religion excluding men or that the cult of General Trần or Đạo Thánh Trần does not have any women members. In fact, both of these cults are closely integrated in contemporary Vietnam.

Đạo Mẫu is viewed as a source of Mother Goddess culture (văn hóa Thánh Mẫu). Scholars suggest that Mother Goddess culture is popular with Vietnamese people because of the Mother Principle (Nguyên lý Mẫu) which guides them in their interactions and permeates the worshippers’ value system. The Mother Principle is based on both lộc Mẫu (Mother Resource) and phép Mẫu (Mother Empowerment). This Mother Goddess culture nurtures the childlike nature of the Vietnamese and inclines them toward the collective spirit and social solidarity. Devotees share the kindness and endless understanding bestowed by the Mother Goddess among each other. Thus, in this interpretation, Đạo Mẫu worshippers are attracted to the belief and practice because it is like the child-mother relationship. This interpretation reflects and supports the sentimental and popular feelings of many worshippers and has a solid place in their personal belief systems and lifeworld (Đặng Văn Lung 1991, 2004).

Other scholars view the importance of the Đạo Mẫu from a translocal religious practice perspective of the value of the pilgrimage activity (Taylor 2004) which is a

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5 For good account on the relationship between Đạo Mẫu and Đạo Thánh Trần, see Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2006: 40-44, 2007: 221-249).
central feature of the religion in contemporary Vietnam. Taylor suggests that the worship of the Mother Goddesses is attractive to female devotees because the belief system and ritual practices “are importantly the creations of women and symbolize predominantly feminine concerns” (2004:292). At the same time he “critically examines the proposition that goddesses symbolize or open areas of social autonomy for women” and points out that “the high expectations invested in feminine spirits are not necessarily a positive indication of the social power of women” (2004:22). However, he then alludes to the power of women in his observation that “southern Vietnamese women have indeed moved beyond authorized interpretation to constitute deities who encode their achievements, condense their histories, provide them support, symbolize their longings, and offer them fulfillment” (2004:292).

Fjelstad provided still another perspective tangentially on the issue of persistence. In a study of Đạo Mẫu practices in a transnational Vietnamese – American community in San Francisco Bay area where the practices are still followed she makes the point that the religion has a special appeal to women. In her analysis on religious discourse of “gender-based differences” (1995: 16) Fjelstad argues that the religion attracts many female devotees because it is a female religion which presents a female-oriented view of spirit possession and an alternative female view of the world. She posits the notion that the female-oriented model of the world it presents is representative of a truly Vietnamese culture while the male-oriented models of other religions relate men to Chinese culture or reflect a foreign representation (1995: 16-27).

Dror posits a historical perspective on the issue of persistence of the Đạo Mẫu in looking at the cult of Лиễu Hạnh, a historical personage who becomes deified as a
manifestation of the Mother Goddess, the Supreme Deity in the Đạo Mẫu pantheon. She argues that Liễu Hạnh’s cult has challenged ideas of male dominance and somehow empowered women. It “has survived through a variety of political regimes and intellectual agendas because it has been a point of struggle between rival visions of social authority” (2007:12). Dror suggests that in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the cult challenged ideologies which promoted male dominant authority over women including Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. In the early twentieth century, this cult was used to negotiate the discourse of modernity and the nation. In this interpretation, the continuance of this cult seems predicated on the critique of the female/male power asymmetries.

Another concern on how mediumship or the phenomenon of Đạo Mẫu spirit possession demonstrates the ability of Đạo Mẫu to maintain relevance is carefully examined by Norton (2009) from an ethnomusical perspective. By looking at the multifaceted relationship between music and ritual performance he argues that “mediumship has maintained its popular appeal and social relevance in late socialist Vietnam because it is a flexible religious system that enables contemporary concerns, anxieties, and aspirations to be expressed and mediated, while at the same time maintaining a sense of connection and continuity with the past” (2009: 20).


1.3.1. Behind the Scenes of Religious Practices

The concept of woman is specific to one’s culture which is to say that gender is socially constructed (Reiter 1975, Ortner and Whitehead 1981, Bynum 1986 and Moore
The concept of a female (or male) is an essential symbol of a culture and as such, it is imbued with different meanings in different cultures. In addition, within a given culture or society, the concept and role of a woman may change over time (Young 1993: x).

In this dissertation, I will try to show that the persona of Vietnamese women is unique although it obviously shares certain similarities with other Asian, Southeast Asian women and women in other parts of the world. This perspective provides a means to understand how Vietnamese see themselves and how the worship of the Mother Goddess affects this persona. It is my observation that Vietnamese women, who worship the Đạo Mẫu, develop a form of soft power. The information on personal beliefs, interpretations of the meaning of Đạo Mẫu and the significance of participation in the ritual practices, has allowed me to demystify and better understand the concept of soft power.

The lifeworld is understood as being a pre-given, experiential world of social actors. It is the real world of the individuals living in it in a given place and time. This is a phenomenological concept which lies below the cultural-symbolic level of description. It is the existential a-priori by which people experience and make a world meaningful. In other words, the lifeworld is the way in which we construct and experience the world we live in (Alfred Schutz 1967, 1970). This dissertation first explores the overall lifeworld of Vietnamese including the everyday life activities of the Vietnamese and the observable cultural level of the reality. I also try to identify underlying assumptions which are implicit and largely unspoken. In doing this analysis, I view soft power as the underlying principle of the lifeworld of Vietnamese women. This is my theoretical construct or model that helps understand and explain how Vietnam Đạo Mẫu women
exercise influence and empower their lifeworld. It is not a Western concept of empowerment; it is a Vietnamese notion of empowerment.

The lifeworld of Đạo Mâu women is imbued with obligations. The individual is a nexus of obligations that produce and are reproduced through ritual processes. Within the nexus there is little room for exercising that aspect of the self that is the agency of willing, the inner self so-to-speak. But by performing rituals and actualizing the outer forms that is the obligation, one is enabled to “go beyond the norm” or surpass the bounds of ritual form and to realize an inner self in its agency or willing, an experience or exercise which we call “soft power.” This soft power seems to be a phenomenon that Foucault does not discuss in his concept of power as a field. For soft power is neither about compliance, nor submission, nor resistance. It must be somewhere amidst these Western or Foucaultian categories.

The Đạo Mâu rituals thus not only produce and reproduce social norms but also allow Đạo Mâu women to live beyond the norms and experience a sense of freedom which actually is not otherwise allowed. That sense of freedom is only allowed in legal adjudicated societies when one doesn’t break the law. In a norm or obligatory governed society like Vietnam, for these women, freedom is experienced by actually performing rituals because rituals contains their own ludic spirit and their own areas in which people can feel like they are giving free expression to their feelings and their emotions or legitimizing the excuse to go out and have fun with their peers.

A lifeworld ruled by laws is different because here individuals exercise and experience a sense of agency or willing openly and “freely” constrained only by the law,

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6 According to Confucian ideals, if every person honors her or his obligations that she or he produces and is produced by, the self is actualized and social relationships (society) is harmonized.
which unlike ritual, exercises its power through adjudication. This is based on the living foundation that ritual operates lives through moral obligations while the law through adjudication or rational contentious arguments.

1.3.2. The Vietnamese Concept of Soft Power in Everyday Lives of Đạo Mẫu women

By performing rituals, Đạo Mẫu women experience soft-power as a form of their self-actualization and self-expression. So, what is soft power all about? As already alluded to, soft power as a concept is too subtle to give a clear definition to. However, I am proposing the need to understand it as part of the common everyday experience for women in Vietnam (not to mention women in other historical cultures); and it is especially relevant to in so far as it is given shape and form by the women participants in Đạo Mẫu ritual. It is in these rituals that all kinds of obligations are created and recreated and actualized; it allows the participants (and observers) to feel and see in ways that give them confidence and encouragement in meeting their everyday responsibilities and fulfilling their personal needs.

The concept of soft power is not translated from a single term in Vietnamese. It is my construct of concepts used in descriptions of the Mother Goddess. It is a composite of Nguyên lý Mẫu (The Mother Principle) including quyền Mẫu (The Mother Capacity), phép Mẫu (The Mother Empowerment) and lộc Mẫu (The Mother Resource). Quyền Mẫu or Mother Capacity expresses what The Mother can do or influence on other people while phép Mẫu (Mother Empowerment) implies how The Mother does what she can do to influence others, and lộc Mẫu (Mother Resource) means the specific reward that The Mother can provide people materially and mentally. These terms have essential symbolic meanings in Vietnamese culture and they are embedded in everyday lives of the
Vietnamese. The sum total of these concepts serve as guiding principles by which the Vietnamese women who worship Đạo Mẫu cope with life activities and create the Mother Goddess culture (văn hóa Thánh Mẫu) which scholars like Đặng Văn Lung’s postulate (2004). This symbolic meaning expresses the way in which the Vietnamese value the Mother Goddess as a metaphor of creation, production, reproduction and protection. These qualities of the Mother Goddess are mystified in Đạo Mẫu, the religion, and in some ways demystified in the everyday lives of the Vietnamese people working to make ends meet. These reified qualities become a framework from which worshippers can make sense of their world but also values and rules for living which actively shape the way Vietnamese talk, conceive, behave and interact spiritually and rationally.

Theorists often conceptualize the concept of power as a form of dominance such as imposing one’s will on another (Weber 1978) or existing in “everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1976: 93). In general everyday sense, power is often interpreted as an undeniable force that someone can exercise over someone else for his or her own purpose. From feminist perspectives, as Allen (2005: 1) summarizes, power is conceptualized as domination or resources or empowerment. Power as domination addresses different causes of women’s universally subordinate status to men (Beauvoir 1974, Frye 1983, Pateman 1988, Eisenstein 1979, Hartsock 1983, Young 1990, Butler 1990, 1993, 1997, Allen 1999 and Bordo 2003). Power as resources means to be distributed and redistributed. If resources are distributed equally and justly, men and women can live in greater harmony (Mill 1970 and Okin 1989). Power as empowerment is a transformative or empowerment-based power (Wartenberg 1990) which against the masculinist conception of power (Miller 1992, and
Starhawk (1987) and Hoagland (1988) describe the feminine model of power as power from within, positive, life-affirming and empowering force.

I view the soft power that Đạo Mẫu women practice as being the power from within, and as Cixous (1977: 483-84) describes a type of power that is exercised over oneself rather than over others. It is different from the popular use of the term soft power developed by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004). Nye believed soft power to be “an attractive power” which emphasizes the ability to attract rather than coerce and its resources as the assets that produce such attraction (Joseph Nye 2004). Nye’s concept, developed to apply to international situations, was that soft power promoted change by emulation as when one country changes itself by adopting or modeling the ways of another country or organization held in high esteem by that country.

I believe that the soft power of the women of Đạo Mẫu is an internal and personal transformation, developed and exercised by the women for themselves in their own way independently of social, cultural and political expectations of them. There is no model that the women follow and the new identity or power evolves with the persona and status of the individual essentially remaining intact. If soft power, according to Nye, involves three resources—culture, political values and foreign policies, the soft power of Đạo Mẫu women has its roots in their belief in the spiritual power and the process of self-

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7 Nye’s “soft power” is a term to describe how nations achieve their goals by appearing more attractive to others (Shaun Tandon (2011). In his own word, Nye describes the soft power in comparison with the hard power: “Everyone is familiar with hard power. We know that military and economic might often get others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements (“carrots”) or threats (“sticks”). But sometimes you can get the outcomes you want without tangible threats or payoffs … A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its examples, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it” (2004:5).
actualization and self-expression through ritualization and socialization. For Đạo Mẫu women, this soft power thus empowers themselves to be themselves in harmony with other obligations in relationships with the others.

Soft power is exercised by Đạo Mẫu women through their religious practices and everyday lives consciously and unconsciously. It is power which exists and is exercised by women through rituals and through daily activities. Women do not need to be in a strong and powerful position. They are in fact even marginalized and vulnerable in their life situations. However, that is why they gain soft power which can be always produced and transformed through symbolic processes. Soft power is a field of power that is associated with the invisible, from within, that which enables these women to gain their self-confidence, self-renewing, reconfirming and recreating the normal and the identity of who they are. Đạo Mẫu helps them recreate the being that is themselves, that is to say, to make a new person or new being within an existing being who can adapt to new situations. The nature of women and the Đạo Mẫu helps nurture this nature.

This soft power is associated with women as a feminine power but it is achievable by and accessible to everybody. In the other words, soft power is not the exclusive domain of women although they may know it better and use it more often and more effectively than men. The problem they may face is one of self-recognition of this power, not necessarily one of seeking equity with men. My analysis thus will bring issues of gender identity and gender equity down to the personal level for a segment of the population long viewed as oppressed by Western standards and as victims of a male dominated society.
Power is a field as Foucault would say. Soft power exists as an intangible but characteristic force which exists within the relationships which women form and which manifests in different ways to deal with different situations. It is like a spiritual power, like the force of reason or feelings or learned behaviors which guide interpersonal actions and decisions. We can’t see it or measure it, or put a finger on it but we can theorize and analyze it. We can get a sense of its existence in talking to the informants and understanding it as an underlying strategy of life, a coping skill, used without an intellectual understanding of its existence or cognitive description.

On the other hand, there is no such one field or one form of power. Power and exercising power are a complex mixture. Thus, in analyzing and understanding soft power, it is essential to see how it interacts and with other fields and forms of power in the every day life of people in the real world. This is the approach I will observe through my ethnographic assessment.

1.4. Research and Writing Methodology

This study is basically an ethnographic study of the women of Đạo Mẫu, initiated by a pilot demographic survey. The fieldwork was undertaken in 2008 and 2009 in two population centers in North Vietnam with sizeable populations of Đạo Mẫu worshippers--Hanoi and Thai Nguyen. One-hundred informants participated in a pilot demographic survey. From these I drew information from and observed 30 key informants as they participated in temple activities and went on with their daily lives. Family members of the key informants were carefully observed and asked for opinions whenever they were available to validate the collected data. I also accompanied several groups as they went on pilgrimages to other religious and cultural sites.
Figure 3: Map 1 - Map of Study Area
The primary field research took place at two temples: an official government recognized temple which is a part of Hanoi’s cultural heritage named “Đềnдрес Vũ Hà Vọng Tù” (The King of Eight Oceans Temple) and a private temple dedicated to Mother Goddess of Mountain and Forest in Thai Nguyen, master medium Vy’s temple.\(^8\)

I went back and forth to both main temples where I conducted my fieldwork for different periods of time. At the temple in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, the practice of Đạo Mẫu is the most diverse and nationally recognized, worshippers living intensively around the temple neighborhood and the suburb of Hanoi. Thus, I spent six months living in the temple neighborhood and participated in four pilgrimages following my informants to different provinces and several one-day trips to visit my informant families. At the temple in Thai Nguyen, the midland center (about 70 kilometers from Hanoi), Đạo Mẫu practices are mixed with the Viet (or Kinh) people and many other minority ethnic groups, worshippers living not only in the temple neighborhood but in different areas of Vietnam. I spent 3 months staying in the temple neighborhood and spent about two months visiting with temple worshippers in their home provinces of Thai Binh, Lang Son, Bac Giang, Hung Yen, Ha Nam, Thanh Hoa and Hai Duong.

I combined case study methods and life history approaches in conducting in-depth interviews and observations of interviewees as they participated in temple activities and in other real life situations. This research explores the lives of the Đạo Mẫu women by having them recount past and current experiences and then probing and analyzing their responses to understand the meaning and significance of these experiences.

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\(^8\) Đạo Mẫu private temples often don’t have an official name. It is usually called as the owner’s temple such as Medium A’s temple.
The methodology employed required spending a considerable amount of time with the interviewees. But this effort resulted in compilations of accurate life histories of the interviewees. The interviewees were viewed as informants of their culture as conceptualized by Langness (1965), Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) and Cole and Knowles (2001). By recording the life history of each interviewee, it was possible to develop a holistic picture of the women worshippers of Đạo Mẫu in contemporary Vietnam. By describing the lives and experiences of ordinary modern women, I sought to understand the influence of Đạo Mẫu in these women’s lives.

I drew on a conceptual framework provided by the work of a number of Western and Vietnamese scholars in my analysis of the information provided by informants including Rappaport’s conceptualizing of ritual obligation (1999) and Turner procesual mode of ritual, the concept of communitas and the theory of ritual performance (1964a, 1967, 1969a, 1969b, 1972 and 1974a), the play-element in the ritual conceptualized in Hunzinga’s work on Homo Ludens (1950), the Mother Principle notion of Đặng Văn Lung (1991, 2004). This framework combination was very useful in helping me draw out meaning in what was said and observed and to understand the significance of what was shared.

The main problem I faced while conducting fieldwork was getting my informants to feel comfortable in sharing what they truly think. Often most informants liked to talk about and share their everyday lives. However, they were quite reticent when the conversation related to their family conflicts and personal secrets. At first, informants asserted that they often went to temple to share with spirits their discomforts while not telling me what it was that made them feel miserable. It was hard to learn about their
lives without knowing their anxieties and pains and how they sought the help of spirits who could share with them. For Vietnamese, it is essential to go to visit people at their home and participate in their important family events. However, it is also important for one not to be too close to other members of the same family because everyone would be skeptical of what they tell you since you may tell other family members and it would be dangerous to family relationships. Gradually, I realized that if I showed them I was different from their friends and I kept a certain distance from their family members, I gained more trust and they started sharing more with me.

1.5. The Dissertation Structure

The focus of my dissertation is on the women of Đạo Mâu - a traditional folk religion in Vietnam - how they deal with life issues, and how the religion helps them deal with the requirements of life in Vietnam. It describes the lifeworld of Đạo Mâu worshippers in which they exercised soft power to self actualize and cope with the stresses of everyday lives in a societal acceptable manner and with the framework provided by traditional values. The study is part of my broader interest in the women of Vietnam and issues of empowerment and gender identity.

Chapter 1 outlines the goal of the dissertation while providing an overview of Đạo Mâu and previous studies on gendered dimensions of Đạo Mâu. The concept of soft power is presented as the key theoretical model or the analytical tool to help understand and explain how Đạo Mâu women exercise influence and empower their lifeworld.

Chapter 2 explores the alternatives that Đạo Mâu women have besides Đạo Mâu to organize their time, energy and focus in dealing with different life activities. It
discusses the reality of being women and identifies the nexus of everyday life obligations of women’s lifeworld by looking at the lives of ordinary modern Vietnamese women.

Shifting from a secular world to spiritual and religious world, Chapter 3 describes the religious life of Đạo Mẫu women by exploring why and how they realize and experience different levels of participation and commitment to the religion. Using life history analysis, this chapter also examines how the community of Đạo Mẫu women is organized and functions among Đạo Mẫu women.

Chapter 4 focuses on an assessment of the lèn dòng ritual from an anthropological point of view. It begins with the descriptions of concepts and traditional beliefs on which the ritual is based. It provides an analysis of the lèn dòng ritual process to see how this process identifies obligations of Đạo Mẫu women and enables them to exercise these obligations. Chapter 5 based on functional approaches outlines the ways in which the lèn dòng ritual practice affects the lives of Đạo Mẫu women. I contend that for Đạo Mẫu women, their ritual practices not only produce and reproduce social norm and maintain social order but also enable them to live beyond the social norm in experiencing their self-actualization. As result, the Lèn dòng ritual practice provides rich data source on the behavior of Đạo Mẫu women as member of the Đạo Mẫu and society.

Chapter 6 is an investigation of the spacetime sphere of Đạo Mẫu temples and pilgrimages. This spacetime is deemed indispensable in the process of mediating between people and spiritual entities as well as of networking among Đạo Mẫu women for their needs of fulfillments in both personal life and communal life. By examining the ways in which Đạo Mẫu temple and pilgrimage are structured or organized as mobile and immobile performances to explore another way of organizing and transforming women’s
lives, a functional analysis of Đạo Mẫu temple as a “focal point of identity” for the worshippers (Punjab 1995:164) and pilgrimages as a “kinetic ritual” (Turner, 1978:13) and “moving images” (Coleman and Eade 2004:1) provides rich data on another province of the lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women.

Chapter 7 focuses on how overall Đạo Mẫu has become a discourse discussing/debating about different changes in contemporary Vietnam. Modern times have changed Đạo Mẫu in ways that support its resurgence and the women’s need of coping with new kinds of life pressures and entertain the worshipper with its ludic spirit and secularization under both official and commercial influences. While carefully examining the play-element (Huizinga 1950) or ludic spirit as one traditional aspect of religious practices, this chapter also outlines the secularization process of ritualizing in modern time which has led to a questioning and blurring of the boundary and transformation between the mystification ritual and the reification ideology in the context of Vietnam itself.

Chapter 8 outlines how soft power evolved for the women of Đạo Mẫu and how the religion empowered these women and helped them develop soft power strategies. It opens new areas of research which might be undertaken in the future in the light of the political, economic, cultural and social changes in contemporary Vietnam. In this chapter I also focus on the value of use of the conceptual implications of using soft power as an analytical tool for studying Vietnamese culture. Soft power as a form of obviation enables not only Đạo Mẫu women but Vietnamese in general to exercise a certain degree of individual agency or self-actualization in dealing with issues in a societal acceptable manner and with the framework provided by traditional values.
CHAPTER 2.
THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF WOMEN
IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

2.1. Introduction

Family life is a cultural given in the lives of traditional Vietnamese women (Mai Thị Tụ and Lê Thị Nhầm Tuyết, 1978, Công Huyễn Tôn Nừ Nha Trang, 1973). Women are rarely if ever viewed as “woman” in any generic sense and are almost always viewed through their relationships, especially their family relationships to others---as daughters, wives, mothers and grandmothers. The traditional lifecycle of women’s lives moves from one phase to the next gradually.

On the other hand, unlike the traditional world of women, contemporary Vietnamese women (especially ones we label modern and living mostly in the cities) have more concerns than their families. Although family relationships still define them, they also have concerns and commitments that go beyond the confines of family life, such as having a career and involvement in community activities (Tine Gammeltoft 1999, Helle Rydstrom, 1998; Melanie Beresford, 1997; Trần Thị Văn Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng, 1998; Daniele Belanger and Khuất Thu Hồng, 1996). Thus, there are different dimensions of their relational lives as they grow older and these include family, community and profession.

Taylor in his introduction to recent studies on gender in Vietnam states that the “systematic study of women in contemporary Vietnam has begun only in recent years and is not yet widely known” (Taylor 2002:7). As Taylor suggests, there is a new kind of scholarship about women in Vietnam which I apply to my study based on empirical
collaborative fieldwork and focused on women’s experiences both inside and outside of the daily routines of life.

This chapter explores the modern lives of ordinary Vietnamese women, in particular a group of women associated with Đạo Mẫu temples in Northern Vietnam. It discusses the reality of being a woman by looking at the life situations of this group. I do this by compiling and analyzing the expressed views and inferred sensibilities of some of these women including my assessments and analysis of scholars in the field and my observations of the interviewees in different life situations. Most of these women are ordinary people doing ordinary things with ordinary concerns and expressed in ordinary terms of everyday talk. My interest is to discover and disclose the ordinariness of these women’s lives as they encounter the different problems of everyday life. This assessment thus becomes a base, from which I can analyze the impact of Đạo Mẫu on these women as they deal with these life situations.

One of the characteristics that I discovered and will describe more fully in this chapter is how in all their various encounters and pursuits, women try to relate things outside their family to things inside their family. But first, I begin with the all-important given that Vietnamese women including Đạo Mẫu followers are first and foremost members of a family.

2.2. Family life

Contemporary Vietnam since the Đổi mới policy was implemented has seen significant changes in family institutions as well as in individuals’ lives. However, many researchers argued that in the transition to market economy, family institutions and kinship networks still remain a central role to individuals’ lives and the foundations for

Figure 4: Women in Their Family Life

While families are produced and reproduced in adapting to new institutional and economic settings under Đổi mới, many traditional Vietnamese values have been reconstituted in daily practice. In this process, Werner (2002:41) observes that women and the Vietnamese family have become “vital markers of the imagined ‘finest traditions’ of the nation” while Pettus (2003:209) views “the retraditionalization” of women in a way is considered by the state authority through mass media as “an antidote to the moral cost of market economy.” This section contends that the retraditionalization of women
has reasserted what are the cultural givens to define women in their traditional domain: the family. These traditional values continue to impose on women the notion of what it means to be a daughter, wife and mother. I am going to apply Bates et al.’s approach (1995) concerning the family circle in their textbook on women’s studies to examine how the family life of Vietnamese women has preserved traditional values and changed in response to modern times. Bates et al. state:

Society may tell us that daughters are “naturally” obedient, sisters competitive, mothers loving of their children, wives dependent on their husbands, and we may indeed conform to these social expectations because we have been taught to do so. But as we examine family interactions in times and places other than our own, we see that there are many diverse ways to fulfill family expectations (1995:202).

Through [Đạo Mẫu] women’s life stories this chapter aims to explore how Vietnamese women still see themselves through their family relationships even if or to the extent that these relationships have been imposed on them and how the family roles of women are socially shaped and the extent to which they have any choice in the roles they are given to play or just simply conform themselves to social expectations.

2.2.1. Daughters

Within the traditional renewal framework in Vietnam since Đời mới, there is still societal preference for a son over a daughter. Informants described how the son carries the father’s last name in the unstated necessity to continue the patriarchal-based family line, for the son and his wife to stay with his parents and take care of them into their old age. There is a popular saying known to the Vietnamese reflecting this dominant thinking: “with one son you can record [a descendant] but with ten daughters you can
write nothing” (nhất năm viết lucr, tháp nữ viết vô). The value of a daughter continues to be dismissed in comparison with that of a son. A son is often better cared for than a daughter. The daughter-in-law is also more valuable than the daughter since “daughters are children of another family” (con gái là con người ta) and “a daughter-in-law is our daughter; a son-in-law is our guest” (dâu con, vẻ khách). These sayings remain common as the sentiments they express.

Ha, the third daughter of a five-sibling family said:

When my sisters and I got married, we no longer belonged to our family. We needed to know about events of in-law families to take care of them. At the ceremony of the last evening of each year (Lễ giao thừa) we need to stay with our husband’s family and only visit our parents later during the New Year ceremony. Our children stay with our parents-in-law although our mother may take care of them when we give birth. We are only allowed to stay with our parents for few weeks after giving birth and have to go back to our in-law-family.

Quyen, a middle-age mother, is the oldest daughter in her family. She said:

I used to know everything in the kitchen. I cooked for my parents and siblings. When I started working in my company, I even helped my parents decide on many family issues. However, when my brother married, it was no longer my home. My sister-in-law took care of everything at my parents’ house. I became a guest in my family. I was not comfortable to participate in making decisions with my parents any more since my sister-in-law would not like it.

Although both son and daughter can inherit their parent’s property, sons often get more than daughters. The underlying principle of inheritance is based on who lives with the parents. Usually parents’ property is their land and house. When the daughter gets married, she will leave her parental house and live with her parents-in-law. The son will take his wife home to live with his parents. Thus, most property will gradually transfer to the son and daughter-in-law when their parents die. The daughter may be given some
jewelry or cash on her wedding as “dowry”. However, it is often very small. Sometimes, if the daughter works and saves some money before getting married, her dowry may be the earnings she has managed to save or that her parents give back to her at her wedding to show off to her in-laws.

One informant from a working family in Hanoi explained that before getting married, it was assumed by her friends and she that they worked harder for less benefit than their brothers. The unmarried women often stayed home to work for the family after finishing high school to help their parents. Their brothers could try to go to college and continue their education as long as they wanted. Daughters were supposed to work with parents to support their brothers. Parents tended to invest more money for their sons to get into professions than for daughters. She said:

My brother was a little younger than I but he did not do much to help my parents. My parents however did not tell him to work for them too. My sisters and I worked with our parents and saved money in order to pay for our brother’s study. Although I passed the entrance exam to study at the University of Physical Education, I could not go there because my parents could not support me financially. When I wanted to study at a vocational school, I needed to work to support my expenses while my brother got financial support from my parents for five year of college at the University of Engineering.

In addition, some informants said they were expected to work outside of the family in the market or in factories in order to support their parents. Their families would use their contributions to renovate or build a house, take care of their siblings and themselves. If the daughters are the firstborn child in the family, they are assumed to have more responsibilities for the care of younger children and contribute financial aid to their parents. In many cases, the oldest sister is considered as “a little mother” of the family.
While most of the informants’ lives have been lived in the recent decades of the 1970s and 1980s, some life stories occurred in the 1940s or 1950 also describe the same situation for daughters. Madam Ba, a 67 year-old woman, who owns a Đạo Mẫu temple in the old quarter of Hanoi, is an orphan. Her dad passed away when she was 8 years old. She helped her mother to take care of her younger sister and brother until she was 10. Then her mother left her grandparent’s house to re-marry. At first, her mother brought her sister and brother to the new husband’s home. Madam Ba lived with her aunty. However, since the living condition in the new husband’s place was not easy, her mother could not keep her siblings there. Madam Ba’s aunt brought her siblings back. Madam Ba then helped her aunt to take care of them until she got married. She often felt it was her responsibility to take care of her younger siblings. Even later, when her brother and his family had a lot of problems she still continued to support them. She said: “because I was his older sister.”

The traditional preference for sons over daughters has undergone some changes in recent times, occasioned in part by the government-instituted two-child-only law. Since many families have only two kids now, instead of the traditional expectation of as many as possible, some informants observe: you can only give birth two times whether you have sons or not. The social pressure of having a son is still there, but the limitations on birthing now compel parents to treat their son and daughter more equally.

An informant said: “I preferred a daughter because I saw daughters more caring and closer to their mother.” Indeed, there is some precedent in traditional attitudes for showing regard for a daughter. An old saying known to Vietnamese says: “Why bother
over whether you have a son or a daughter; whoever is dutiful and loyal is better” (Con trai con gái mà chi. Con nào có nghĩa có nghì văn hơn).

Di, a grocery shop keeper in the old quarter of Hanoi said:

My son stayed with us but he did nothing for us but spend our money on gambling and going out with his friends. Only my daughter took care of us while we were sick. That is why Vietnamese often say: “Good fields and strong buffaloes cannot compare with having the oldest daughter” (ruộng sâu trâu nái không bằng con gái đầu lòng).

Madam Tam, a 78 year old mother who owns a drum business in Hanoi’s old quarters has six daughters and two sons. She and her husband invested more for their oldest son’s education because their other children worked to support him and the family. However they shared the family property equally to all children since they all contributed to make it. She said:

We only sent our oldest son to college because we could not afford for every child to go. Our daughters and the youngest son finished their high school education and worked for the family business. They started working to produce drums since they were five or six years-old. Recently my husband and I divided our house into equal shares for my children since they all got married. Everyone had their own little store selling drums in the old quarters including my daughters-in-law and sons-in-law.

She said she was very angry at her oldest son:

He was not comfortable when we divided our big house into eight equal shares for each son and daughter in 2003. He always wanted more because he thought he was the oldest son. However, what did he do to contribute to the family business? Fortunately, my husband and I were still strong and under control so that he did not dare to argue in front of us. I needed to remind him many times to make sure he would not make trouble for his sisters and brother when we passed away.

Coming from different family backgrounds, most of my informants told me that daughters tend to have close bonds with their mothers since they share women’s work with their mothers from very early ages. From the age of 6 or 7, a daughter is expected to help her mother to prepare meals, clean the house, raise animals for food and even take
of her younger siblings. In addition, daughters seem to be more understanding with their mothers’ problems and be on their mothers’ side in coping with life difficulties. The close bond between mothers and daughters become even stronger when the daughter gets married and moves to live with her husband and in-laws. Married daughters are more comfortable sharing family problems with mothers and asking them for help with childbearing and childrearing.

Hoa’s mother is a single parent with four children. She started working for her mother when she was 6 years old. Her mother sold medicine privately which was a prohibited business by the government during the 1980s. She needed to help her mother avoid encounters with the police by taking care of the house in order for her mother to escape whenever the police came to check the house. When her mother was sick, Hoa cared for her and cooked rice soup and massaged her mother so she could feel better. Hoa is now a young professor at a university with a Ph.D in Education and is still a caring daughter.

Sisters are often good companions. The older sister tends to make concessions to her younger sister. However, sometime, sisters may compete for more attention from their parents and siblings. For many sisters, it is common to do things together like go to study or work at the same time or place. They support each other psychologically and financially until each gets married. Some remain close even after having their own families.

Van and Hanh are in their late 30s. They are sisters and have been business partners since they graduated from high school. They both have their own house although neither is married yet. They often visit their mother’s store to chat and go shopping
together. For them, it is important to show their mother and other siblings that they are independent daughters but they still really need support from each other.

Hanh said:

During childhood, our parents often fought and yelled at each other. My older sister often held me while we were crying. We got beaten by our father. When I was really tired, my older sister helped me to cook and clean the house and assisted my mother at her grocery store. She was really good to me. Our parents divorced, then remarried with others and left us nothing, my older sister started selling things at the market and she taught me how to do business. She was only 3 years older than I but she was really like a role model. I would not be successful without her assistance.

2.2.2. **Wives**

When pressed for an explanation on why they got married, most of my informants shared that getting married and being a wife seemed “natural” for women. Before thinking of personal happiness, most of them agreed that “being a wife” is the right way to fulfill family expectations for a daughter as well as social expectations for a woman. Hoa, the college teacher read for me a well-known poem to modern young women about marrying which starts with the statement: “How could a mature woman not get married?” *(Gái lớn ai không phải lấy chồng)*

On the other hand, their perception of being a wife varies. Some informants said a wife is supposed to support her husband and maintain a good relationship with her in-law family. A few said that a wife is supposed to share with her husband, raise their children, build their own home and maintain good relationships with both sides of the family. Although being a wife seems to address a lot of women’s duties, some of my informants’ replies did mention the pleasure of having a soul mate and living in their own

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10 In “Lòng mẹ” (The Mother’s Heart) --- A poem of Nguyễn Bính (1936)
way or escaping from their own parents’ house by being a wife. Some of them shared a
desire of breaking away from the patterns of their mothers’ lives and resented maternal or
parental dependency.

For most people, marriage with a wedding ceremony is considered as a “mature
ritual” for women (and men). Parents will not find the completeness of their parental duty
until their children’s weddings. This refers to the notion that marriage not only brings
maturity but also stability for women. In fact many of my informants shared that they
only feel completeness when they are married women. They often found that “adult”
status can only be achieved or recognized through marriage.

Madam Di, a mother of four daughters and two sons said:

Marriage was important because it asserts your adulthood. My children
were only viewed as mature when they got married. My husband and I
only felt that we finished the rising of our children when they found their
own spouse and built their own families. My youngest daughter hasn’t
gotten married. She is in her late thirties. Although she is paid well for her
job but what would happen if she gets sick? Who will be with her when
she gets old? We will not be there for her forever. Her siblings have their
own families.

Although contemporary Vietnamese women enjoy more opportunities than their
mothers’ generation, there are still a lot of family and social pressures on women about
going married. Nguyễn Hữu Minh observed that since 1945 Vietnamese have gained
“more freedom for young couples in mate selection, later marriage, and a common
pattern of neolocal residence” (1999:1). The reality, however, remains that society

11 Nguyễn Hữu Minh indicated in his dissertation (1999) that: “Vietnam has been experiencing dramatic
socioeconomic and political change since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in
1945 (after 1975 it was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Revolution, warfare, marriage and
family laws aimed at prohibiting child marriage and guaranteeing equal rights for men and women,
collectivization and economic reforms; these are some changes which have taken place over the last 50
years. As a result of these events, marriage patterns in Vietnam could be expected to change substantially
expects women to get married at the “right age.” What is the right age for marrying varies in different settings nowadays. In rural communities, my informants shared a common concern that women are supposed to get married in their early twenties while women in urban areas think it is fine to get married in their late twenties; some even promote the notion of getting married in their early thirties. However, this pressure is based on not only the conception of which age is the best for childbearing but also the period that women are physically the most attractive. If a woman passes the “right age,” she will be viewed as less valuable to be married to and have difficulty to find a man to marry.

Mate selection is not quite a free choice for women. There are a lot of social expectations which put pressure on women while choosing her mate. Besides emotional and psychological motivations, women tend to select their mate based on their familial and social expectations such as a mate from the same or a higher family social status background. Hoa said she struggled to get married with her current husband because her family opposed it. Her mother said he had a “lower degree” than she did. While she had a Ph.D. degree and worked as a college professor, he was “only a high school teacher with a bachelor’s degree.” Later, her parents approved her marriage to him because they said: “you are getting old (Hoa was in her middle thirties). It was not a good age to select the best mate already!” Most young informants agreed that they heavily counted on their

from tradition to modern as is the case in most Asian countries. Some major characteristics of this transformation are a trend towards more freedom for young couples in mate selection, later marriage, and a common pattern of neolocal residence” (1999:1). He explained further: “Age at first marriage has increased during the last few decades. The trend toward later marriage is associated with an increase of education, high percentage of military service, and more freedom in mate choice. Age at marriage is expected to continue to increase, but with a slower speed than compared to earlier decades” (1999:1).
parents’ approval before deciding who to get married to. “Older people have experiences, they know better than us. Especially, our parents understand us and care for us; they often give the right advice.”

Women who remain unmarried are not common in Vietnamese society. People can make fun of them by calling them “madam aunts,” (bà cô), which signifies a mean and difficult woman. The women unable to find a husband (quá lâu, lỡ th Icelandic chồng) are compared to a “slowly exploding bomb” (bom nóng chậm). Family, relatives and friends become concerned about this “madam aunt.” Everyone would try to help her as a match maker. In many cases, my informants including the “madam aunt” and her family would employ the spirit world to explain and resolve the problem. For example, they would explain that these “madam aunts” are tied down by some fate destiny with a spirit (nợ duyên âm) or have a lonely fate (sợ cô quạ). Đạo Mẫu worshippers believe that if these women ask a master medium (đồng thầy) to host a Destiny Servicing Ritual (Lễ cất tiền duyên) they will be able to find a good mate and get married.\(^\text{12}\)

In contrast with those thoughts, some informants have strong opinions about their right to decide who and when to get married. Two sisters, Van and Hanh, in their late 30s told me that they would only marry the men who deserve them; they will not accept marriage just to be married. They said: “Vietnamese often say ‘having any man is better than no man’ (méo mó có hơ không) but we won’t follow that.”

A 48 year-old wife shared:

> It is simple to me like a natural responsibility to take care of them (her husband and two teenage daughters). I think that Vietnamese women only need to be respectful but they have no need to be better than the husband. Our nature is such that if our husband loves cares and respects us, we can

\(^{12}\) For additional information on different types of rituals, see Chapters 4 and 5.
do everything for our family no matter how difficult it is. We don’t want to be the first. We only want to make our husband and family happy.

On the other hand, women are aware of the possibilities of separation and divorce. Hoa said quite liberally:

Being a wife is not only for loyalty but also for personal happiness. I did not feel much satisfaction when I got married. I used to think that I got married to make my [natal] family happy any way. If it would not work out I would divorce. However it worked out well. My husband and I shared some common thoughts. He even had ambition to go back to school for a better career. He earned his master’s and is now working for his Ph.D. While studying, he still made money and he was generous to my [natal] family.

Although growing numbers of women may choose to separate or divorce after marrying or may have children without getting married, this is still not culturally and socially acceptable. Unmarried and divorced statuses seem to make women feel insecure. They face unwelcome social pressures and the emotional stress of unstable relationships and loneliness as well as family and economic pressures. Some of my informants who are single or divorced remain strong and independent like Van and Hanh while most of them feel hurt and insecure when thinking of these experiences.

Divorced women tend to remain alone—they don’t get married a second time. A few of my informants remarried after their divorce. Others harbored negative feelings about men and family pictures. They said: “I do not want to be in the same situation again” or “if I remarried and lived with my husband’s family, it would be no different; I would serve my husband and his family again. I want to enjoy life and be myself.”

2.2.3. Mothers

It seemed to be a very strange question for my informants when I asked them “Did you want to become a mother?” The older women looked at me and asked: “Why? Didn’t you?” The women who had yet to become mothers often asked me back: “How
about you?” Given the fact that I was pregnant during my field work, some informants considered themselves thoughtful to advise me not to ask that way. One said:

What are you thinking when you ask this kind of question? We are all mothers or will-be mothers. You better keep your words to protect your child you are bearing. Do you want him or don’t you? When you ask maybe someone who could not have a child would hate you and wish misfortune on you.

I must say that I was little taken aback and frightened about the possibility that my less-than-thoughtful-question might cause envy or resentment toward me. But what I found out was quite interesting. The first reaction of my informants toward the question made me aware of what became a stock response: “being a woman, of course one will be a mother” (đã là phụ nữ đương nhiên phải là mẹ). Most of my informants were much more comfortable and open when we started talking about their experiences of motherhood. However, this socially and culturally expected attitude toward motherhood is not everything. When it comes to personal experiences, there is much fulfillment and satisfaction as well as anxieties, frustration, and even ambiguity addressed in different situations and circumstances of the performance of motherhood.

Motherhood is women’s “natural role” (thiên chức) in two senses: in one sense, women are obligated to bear and rear children, while in the other sense, childbearing and childrearing are a major source of a woman’s pride and a significant achievement. The need of having children is so deeply ingrained in the culture that couples without children face a lot of pressure from their families. Commonly, married couples have children during the first year of their marriage.

A middle-aged high school teacher told me:

Children are the source of happiness since raising them calls attention to sharing responsibilities and assuring the family future. This joy and the sharing of responsibilities stabilize marriage. It enables me to make a true
connection with my husband’s family as a member of the family. If a woman could not have a child she feels insecure as she has no future insurance and her relationship to her husband and his family is very loose.

Another informant who entered a recent beauty contest for married ladies told me:

Six year ago, I got married and had two children with my now ex-husband. My children both had serious genetic problems and died soon after their birth. I felt so guilty and asked him to grant a divorce. He was the oldest son of his family, he needed to remarry and have children. It was so painful but I overcame it. I found a new partner and we plan to marry soon after the beauty contest.

Some informants initiated the desire of having children themselves. A young accountant working for a foreign bank had divorced her husband after five years of marriage since he could not have children. She wanted to adopt a child but her husband didn’t agree. She told me:

Having a kid was always my dream which was an important part of myself and a happy marriage for me. The children made family a true family because of both the difficulties and happiness required for raising them. I could not imagine a family without kids. What else is more important than having a family?

Traditionally, a woman is often held responsible for not being able to have children. Nowadays, there is some equity based on science in accusations of who is responsible for infertility (of women) or impotency (of men). Women still often bear the brunt of responsibility, completely contrary to the science, for the sex of the child or lack of children. The informant’s case is not quite common yet. A wife often accepts the fact when her husband is not able to have children and continues the marriage. But a husband has a tendency to divorce and remarry another woman when his wife is not able to have children.

The issue of needing to have a son also seems to put a lot of pressures on women. For example, if they don’t have sons, the family complains that they “don’t not know
how to give birth” (không biết đẻ). However, interestingly many informants declared that, the most pressure was put on their husband not themselves. A woman without a son may feel sad and less valuable to her husband’s family but no one makes joke of her and she can still enjoy a mother-daughter relationship. The husband might be ridiculed at work or by his family for his inability to have a male child whether it is his inability or the wife’s inability. Men in rural areas often suffer pressures the most since other men in the community can make fun of them during every collective gathering. In urban areas, the lifestyle of people has changed to the point where people are not concerned much about other’s life. So there is less talking about the private life of each individual. However, it is still common to see some people at work or relatives or friends make fun of the husband as “a maternal grandfather building a commune house” (ông ngoại xây nhà tình nghĩa) because the house later would be saved for their daughter and son-in-law. This is also described as a type of uxorilocal marriage as frowned upon in Vietnam as it is in China.

Childrearing is primarily a responsibility of the mother. Vietnamese often say that “a kid turns bad because of the mother, a grandkid turns bad because of the grandmother” (Con hư tài mẹ, cháu hư tài bà) or “good fortune depends on the mother” (Phúc dưc tài mưa). While there is a growing number of fathers who are comfortable to be side by side with mothers to raise their children, the majority of men still assume the wife is responsible to train their children to be good people. A 46-year old man, the son of atemple owner said: “the father helps the kid to think about his career and ambitions while the mother trains them to love and care for others.” This man’s mother told me “I want to be close to my kids and make sure they grow up as good people.”
Although childrearing looks like an automatic responsibility of the mother, the right to keep and make decisions for the children really depends on who is financially responsible for the support of the child. Sometimes, the husband interferes by making bad decisions, but women cannot control the decision if he works and she doesn’t. In addition, women as mothers often face competition with their mothers-in-law on how to raise the children. There are many conflicts between generations about taking care of and teaching children. Some of my informants said although the mother-in-law may help you to take care of the kid, you need to learn how to deal with her to keep discipline. She always wants you to follow her way which may not be relevant nowadays. Others said that they just ignored the mother-in-law and raised the kids in their own way. Of course, in these cases, they showed their economic independence from their in-law families.

Motherhood is not only a “full time job” but it is also a “life time job.” Mothers need a lot of practical and emotional support from others. My informants often found help and support from their kin networks. It is almost impossible for women to work while taking care of children without help from husbands and families.

Consequently, a mother continues to take care of her children and then grandchildren. Most of grandmothers help take care of grandchildren. Because their daughters or daughters-in-law are busy working outside the home and have no time for their kids, grandmothers will take the kids home and take care of them during working hours. Grandmothers also come to live with their children to take care of their grandchildren, usually after their children give birth.

A 36 year-old garment worker told me:

I got married when I was only 18 years old because I was pregnant before marriage. We got divorced after a few years living together because my
husband got drug addicted. Since then my son has been living with my mother since I need to go out to find a job. Sometimes, my mother-in-law wants to take care of my son because he is her only grandson. However, my son cannot get along well with his father’s family; he cries and becomes too lazy to study, so I need to take him back to live with my mother. I twice tried to raise him by myself but it was very difficult because I went to work the whole day. My son would have no time with me and eat out by himself.

An elementary teacher who retired at 48 so that her daughter could get a job at her school said:

My back was not good since I was 45 years old. I felt too tired to teach but I could continue to teach a few more years. However, my daughter who graduated from the college of education could not get a job in the city. I wanted her to take over my job and the official at the department of education agreed to let me retire and put her in.

There has been a changing attitude toward motherhood among young women. Some informants in their twenties said they would delay having children until they were more financially stable. These women often lack family support and they need to work with their husband to create some economic foundation for their families before spending time and money taking care of their children.

Not every woman accepts the blame or allows herself to feel less valuable because of having no son. Han, a successful business woman in Dong Xuan market said:

Children were the spirits’ gift. If we didn’t have a son, we didn’t. We could not change it. If my husband was disappointed, it was his problem. If his family complained, it was their problem. Having no son was not the end of our life or the family. I would not let anyone hurt me or my daughters.

In reality, some men are also changing their attitude and share this perspective because they are independent from their family’s influence. There are more men who are willing to take care of their children or take turns with their wives in taking care of their children.
2.3. Social life

A woman in Vietnam is culturally considered to become an adult when she is married. However the idea has shifted to the point where women are considered social adults when they actively participate in social life. This change is similar to Sacks’ observation about the role of women as members of society when “they work collectively as part of a productive group larger than or separate from their domestic establishment” (Rosaldo and Lamphere ed. 1974: 218). In Vietnam the economic reform process since the late 1980s and modernization with the influence of technology has opened many possibilities for women to participate in the open-market economy as well as new industries in the country. Although women continue to prioritize domestic works they have more opportunities to extend their work outside the family and create types of family businesses and enlarge these businesses as much as possible. My informants all felt that they have more opportunities to experience alternative roles to live outside the conventional family circle. These possibilities are often associated either with occupational roles or communal membership in a formal or informal community.
Figure 5: Women in Their Social Lives
These changes however still reassert the gender-based division of labor and occupation in both domestic and public spheres (Werner and Belanger 2002, Trần Ngọc Angie 2002). While Đời mới continues to strongly emphasize the retraditionalization of womens’ familial roles, the change creates a bigger gap between the work-life balance for women. In examining possible roles besides familial roles women may experience, this section describes how women perceive their role changes and to look at how the interplay among social categorizations affects their self-image and self-esteem.

2.3.1. Occupational roles

While maintaining domestic responsibilities, most informants work outside their home. They participate in a diverse range of occupations such as teachers, government workers, factory workers etc. Many informants however mentioned that they chose to be self-employed and work as venders, the owners of restaurants or jewelry shops.

Occupational roles in fact do not bring much change in the nature of the familial roles of women. Some informants who are successful in their profession seem overwhelmed by the overlap between work and home. Others mentioned their pressures of gender segregation and found various obstacles in the job market. They found it to be a struggle to enter a “male” profession and work as an administrator. Men are often preferred for higher positions with better pay.

My informants commonly expressed a lot of anxieties in dealing with husbands and in-laws to be able to work and improve their professional life. Trying to balance a work-life with a home-life has caused painful experiences for some women who want to have a good work performance. Most of my informants still live with extended families that include either their parents or parents-in-law.
Hoa said:

My mother-in-law tried to force me to feed the pigs and chickens she raises for her living; then cook and wash dishes for the whole family. I told my husband to live separately because I could not live the way she lived, fighting if I was not obedient to her. I needed to teach my students and participate in other activities at my university. I could make money and I didn’t need to raise pigs and chickens or take care of a big family like her. I could send my 3 year-old son to the preschool at my college. However, my mother-in-law wanted to hold me to her living style.

A female manager of a printing company went through hardship caused by her husband because she spent a lot of time at her work. She said:

My husband was an administrator at the University of Industrial Arts, but he was always concerned about me working late and making more money than he. I told him, our children were growing up well while he was busy at work. So I wanted to spend more time at my work too. I enjoyed both my family and company. However, he would not accept it. He said he expected me to be a good wife by spending most of my time at home. We ultimately got divorced and I raised the children myself. I have made money to support my daughter to study abroad. When a woman faces too many responsibilities, rarely can we get support from our husband or in-law’s family. I saw that a common solution for women is giving up their career. I chose instead to get a divorce to do what I wanted and not be supported by my husband or the extended family.

Informants who held a college or higher degree often talked about their concern about getting more education, a good job and a stable income as being an important basis for finding a good mate and having a happy family. They often associated their profession with a good foundation for fulfilling their familial roles. Some informants said being a professional was an essential complement with their family roles. These female professionals tend to presume their traditional roles to be in charge of raising their children with good manners and behavior. Their social role is important to their sense of value and personal worth.

Han, a female doctor at the hospital of children said:
If you get better educated, then you know how to raise your children better. I believed that my husband had a lot of respect for me because I taught my son and daughter well. Our mother’s generation didn’t face many challenges to handle children like we do. They only needed to feed us and guide us to be good people. Nowadays, mothers need to prepare their children to face a rapidly changing society. Everything in the future for our children will be much more competitive and complicated. If you don’t learn and learn well, you will not be able to catch up with what our children need help on or provide them adequate support.

A few informants in my study were factory workers and shared different views of their occupational roles. Occupational roles seem to be not just for higher personal worth but to cope with the emerging economic problems as well.

Minh said:

Female workers in my factory (in a suburb of Hanoi) often get low skilled jobs with low pay. However, at least we can make a regular income to support the family. The material needs have been increasing recently. We need cash for everything. It is not like we could work hard at home and support our kids or take care of our parents.

Although the practices of occupational roles in their working environments may vary from woman to woman, the continuing contact between them and their co-workers and colleagues have important implications for their lives. Information about work, social relationships, pay, professional developments, and other work-related issues is readily passed along in everyday conversations and activities outside of the family circle among co-workers and on the news, thus shaping the perception of women’s social status among women. This creates greater freedoms for women to think about their personal lives in between the family and social life.

An important feature of the women’s community in working environments is the significance of female leaders/managers or successful co-workers in the socialization of women as role models. This influence seems a natural result of the perception of their familial roles. In the family domain, women tend to follow their mothers or sisters as role models.
models. Being an obedient daughter, supportive wife and loving mother is taught to them from the time when they are little girls. Extending this attitude in perceiving occupational roles enables them to find a role model from their female co-workers or leaders and managers. Some informants said that women look up to their role models at work because they provide another perspective on womanhood in which they can explore opportunities for self-expression, visualizing self-image and self-esteem. This then allows them to gradually negotiate with their spouse, relatives and partners to experience and facilitate their choices.

When evaluating and emulating other female role models women tend not to focus much on qualities described as good/bad or talented/ordinary women. They seem to prefer qualities of being happy (hạnh phúc) or lucky (may mắn) women. Women who are successful at work are considered role models for other women often because they handle the work-life balance well. These female role models however need to be successful in both their family roles and occupational roles. In other words, women tend to have high standards in judging their role models at work more than at home. A social model seems to be idealistic for women to follow in reality. Thus, although the female social role model may be the central figure in the lives of women, it is hard for them to be satisfied to follow this model.

My informants often said that their role model took care of the family well before practicing other roles in society. Taking care of the family well meant the ability to give birth, raise kids, support the husband and be kind to the parents and relatives, and maintain good relationships with neighbors. A lucky woman will have fewer conflicts inside the family. A happy and lucky woman is kind (tuệ tể), skillful (tháo vát, đảm đang)
and humble (*biểi nhương nhìn*). A lucky and happy woman usually gets support from her parents and husband so that she can do well in both family and career.

A successful owner of a watch shop in Hanoi, who used to work as an accountant at a nationwide candy company described,

I wanted to be active (*năng động*), creative (*sáng tạo*) and skillful (*tháo vát*) so that I could balance my work and life to maintain success on both sides. I tried to learn from my successful co-workers to know what should be done to get support and balance. I used to be a popular accountant at my company. My children and my husband knew about it and were proud of me. However, I retired early to open a shop because I could make more money to support my children’s studies.

Hoa commented on the chairman of her department that:

You could not be a good manager without being good member of your family. You should organize your family well if you have talent in leadership and management. Of course you need to be able to build your support network whether it includes your husband, parents, kids, house assistant or colleagues.

On the other hand, few informants argued that a woman might not need to care about her family life if she wanted to devote her life to her career. A female official in the Ministry of Culture and Information told me about her failure in raising her kids and bitterly concluded that,

It is impossible to be good at both family and career; you have to choose whether you do a good job at your work place and do an ordinary job for your family or vice versa. You have only 24 hours a day; you can only do certain things within that amount of time. I wish the day was 48 hours, so women could get everything done both her work and her family matters. I wish I did not have family to work on my own, you know.

Women who are self-employed suggested another perspective of their occupational role. For them, working as shop owners, even as street vendors to make money to support their families, gave them a higher status in the family. They have
flexible schedules to fulfill their familial roles since they need to prioritize their work first. The watch shop owner said:

If you were busy doing housework, your business might fail. Where would money come from for your family to live? My husband and his family could not expect me to stay home and cook for them. Who would run my shop? I arrange time to prepare for important family events such as death anniversaries or weddings or certain occasions. Otherwise, I hire a housekeeper to help with housework.

Different from the working perspective provided by women participating in trade and small scale businesses above, a small number of informants said working was not so much for economic benefit as for their enjoyment or fun. For a certain amount of time, they feel a need to leave their families or keep a distance from familial roles to experience something different and even more interesting at work such as interpersonal connections. This attitude is similar to Esterik’s analysis of the Thai concept of work. He said:

Work is productive and accomplishes something to the extent that it is sanuk or fun. Women in office work and sales may speak of going to work as ‘paj thiaw thamngan’ – to go and have a good time at work. When work ceases to be fun – usually for interpersonal reasons – then jobs are left (1995:255).

2.3.2. **Communal roles**

Besides participating in working communities, my informants often join different groups such as the women’s union, religious communities and supportive communities. Religious and supportive communities are often organized informally among women themselves without official recognition. Religious communities are organized through a temple or church leader or a group of worshippers at a temple or church. Women’s communities are organized based on some common values and interests such as networks
of vendors working in the same market or the same area, network of shared religious worshippers, old classmates, stay-home moms, etc.

The Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU) is sponsored by the government and serves as the source of state ideology on women’s roles and development. It was founded in 1930. The Women’s Union is an official organization for women at four administrative levels---the central, provincial, district and commune government levels. This organization has a total membership of more than 13 million women. Since its foundation, VWU has transformed itself to become a developmental organization, which is mandated to protect women’s legitimate rights and strive for gender equality (The Document issued by the Xth National Women Delegates 2007). Informants said this organization provides some services to support and educate women in their family and career. It especially focuses on the role of being a “peaceful center” (trung tâm hòa giải) to help women dealing with their everyday life conflicts.

Participating in different communities, informants shared the common thought that they enjoyed being a member of these various groups. As one informant observed, “All of us had been friends for such a long time.” Very few informants said that it was difficult for them to participate in social activities since they were so busy with their families. One of them said she was not interested in communal activities because they wasted her time. She needed to take care of her family. She only did the minimum when there were collective activities in her neighborhood so that other people would not criticize her and her family.

Membership in women’s communities is often very flexible. Some groups will have a small annual fee to be spent on group gatherings and for gifts on special occasions.
of each member or the member’s family such as occasions of a newborn baby, weddings, ceremonies honoring a long life, funerals, or causes of hospitalization. Other groups may want money to be contributed on each occasion separately.

Women’s communities don’t have a primary economic function. Although members may sometimes engage in such tasks as making food to sell on special holidays or working in a temporary project to earn extra money, these are neither regular nor organized endeavors. A few informants gave examples of women’s communities which serve as workshops or seminars, but these are rare. Activities in women’s communities were typically described as primarily social. An informant described a gathering of a group of female vendors at the old quarter of Hanoi on Tet (the New Year’s holiday in the lunar calendar):

We got together around 8 AM on January 4 (of the lunar month) at one member’s restaurant. There were about 17 of us among 26 members who owned a shop on the same street. We ate noodles and talked about family and Tet until 9:30 AM. Some generous members gave lucky money to others as a good luck gift for New Year’s. We then walked to visit each member’s family until noon. Some needed to go home for family events, some got to do some other personal stuff. About 9 of us visited the Tet market. We had lunch with street food. It was good because we did not need to take care of anything or anyone except going out and chatting for fun. Usually we are very busy with our shops; sometimes some members have arguments and conflicts over competition to get customers, reducing prices or even fighting with someone in the member’s family. However, we like to get together at some special times. The gathering helps us understand each other better and care for each other more. We don’t have a specific group leader. However, some older members or members who have organizing skills and have more respect from other members do the task of calling everyone to make a time for gathering for a certain purpose. We then might prepare everything under these members. It is not a strict or formal rule but everyone knows about it by talking to a member before joining the group.
Many informants thought it was comfortable to talk about women’s issues within their own female community. One explained when I asked her more specifically on what they talked among themselves:

There are a lot of issues we find a hard time to talk about at home, even among our network of kin. We complain about husband-wife problems, discuss about where to shop, health care, sex, in-law relatives, and mothers-in-law. Sometimes we learn how to do business or make money. We gossip and laugh because of our jealousies, etc. We sometimes get caught up in shouting at and quarreling with one another but it is an anxious moment. After shouting, others come and talk and we get together again and sympathize with each other. We need to be able to throw out our anxieties and anger. We have no place to do that. When getting together, if you do it, others understand and sympathize.

This fact is more like creating a network simply for mental support, temporarily escaping from the family, getting encouragement from peers for something different or a “less boring life.” According to informants’ accounts, women in these communities are freer from familial duties as wives and mothers. They have opportunities to express themselves fully, to be listened to by others, to discover their capacities and possibilities and even practice their skills as organizers or leaders. A retired middle school teacher told me:

We need friends to share our life issues with including problems and joys. The husband-wife relationship is not always as close as are close friend relationships. Many things you could not talk to your husband about such as your feeling disappointed in him or tired of being a mother to the family, your hope for better relationships with relatives and changes in the family and so on. You need to have someone like yourself to listen to you openly and to be understanding. You may wish to see your peers to just forget about your family obligations and do something else. I feel like I can recharge my battery to return home after meeting my friends at the temple.

A stay-home mom informant said:

I need to do something outside the family; it is to network with people to support my husband. Sometimes, I join rituals for my mother and sisters at the temple to support them. I like to listen to the music and take my son
with me since I feel the spirit helps my family, especially to teach my son to be a good person.

For aging informants, they often have insecure feeling about the effect of age and there is a greater need for a support network as they age. Since women are supposed to get married and give birth at certain ages, they are busy with motherhood and wifehood until they get older. Their children grow up and leave home unmarried. They have no children or grandchildren to take care of. Their husband does not pay much attention to them. There is no mother-in-law to argue with. Because their lives had been full of obligations they have been taught and have practiced coping with obligations. The new problem seems odd but real in that it is not easy for them to handle this “freedom.” Although some informants had no problem enjoying their social activities while getting older and freer from family obligations, many of them told me they needed to learn how to spend their free time and work with their freedom.

A retired high school teacher described:

My house was empty because my two children left home to work and study far away. My husband was still busy with his work. What could I do now? Life seemed less motivated and interesting when you have no one to worry about and who needs your help. I finally joined a retired teacher’s club. We teach illiterate orphans every Monday and Wednesday evenings. We have gatherings every Sunday morning to read news and discuss interesting topics.

For some informants, social activities like going to the temple and meeting with older women are very important. It is not easy to be comfortable with their young children and grandchildren compared to chatting with their old friends or participating in religious practices. As one informant described, “All my children want is my help to do their work for them. They do not want to talk to me or include me in their conversations. They make me feel like a housekeeper only.”
Madam Tam said:

My children have their own store and family. They don’t need my help. I often go back to my hometown in Ha Nam to perform religious rituals. I think we work hard to make money for living but we should share with my village people. This is also a way to build good fortune for the whole family. At my village, my husband and I can meet our friends and talk about the old days and see what to keep up. If I only sit inside this room, listen to noise while my husband is making drums, it is hard.

It is interesting to see, sometimes, the family members of my informants have positive comments on their participation in outside family communities. A retired engineer, husband of the leader of a women’s union in a district in Hanoi commented:

If you only care for your own family, you are selfish. What would you do if something bad happened to you inside your family? You need community support as well as to support the community to be a good woman.

While telling me about his mother, a son of a temple leader said:

I respect my mother’s friends and her followers because they are very good women. They take care of their families well. They get together at my mother’s temple whether they tell their families or need to hide all because they want to do good things for their families. My mother can support them and have their support because they share a naive belief. I can not. I can think smarter than my mother or organize better than her but they believe her and it works. If I lead the temple, I might not be successful like her.

Support networks from the women’s community play a crucial role in reshaping women’s understanding and practice of their familial roles. Most of my informants said that they learned from their peers how to interact with their families and often benefited from others’ experiences and skills. Interestingly, there are more ways of forming women’s communities nowadays. Young working informants told me that they joined online mom and wife clubs. There are some very helpful websites to register without a membership fee. Others found it helpful to participate in on-call advisory clubs for mother-children health care and other related issues. They can call and ask advice
anytime and feel comfortable to talk about everything without embarrassment of showing their ignorance.

A young wife and mother of two little children said:

I thought being a wife and mother was something natural. It was so simple for me to think that moving from my parents’ house to live with my husband and his family and give birth to my children were steps gradually occurring in my life. However, it was too complicated. I did not quite know what to do as a wife and a daughter-in-law and it was worse when I needed to take care of my children. My mother did not give me helpful advice. However, I found mentors from my peers in the group of mothers online. We had a website to share everything. You could learn everything from how to cook rice soup to how to talk to your husband and ask for help from your mother-in-law.

2.4. Conclusion

The group of women associated with Đạo Mẫu temples in Northern Vietnam, defined in the aggregate by their participation in Đạo Mẫu temples, come from all walks of life. In trying to summarize what is common about them, it seems evident that the realities of their lives are focused on fitting into and finding happiness in a world that begins with family, but for many this extends to social groups beyond the confines of mothers, children, husbands and in-laws, groups that include wage workers, salaried professionals, and female cohorts (one of which is of course the Đạo Mẫu temple). This is a relational world encumbered by modern times, complicated with competing obligations and desires and coping strategies. I contend from here on that this world (of women’s experiences) is suffused with a kind of power that is soft. It does not compete with the kinds of power differentials that we normally associate with the word power, especially with the Foucaultian categories now popular in Western anthropology. It rather operates in the way women experience their roles in family life, in their work to make ends meet in support of families and children, and it is sourced and experienced perhaps
in its purity in extra-familial activities such as by participating in Đạo Mẫu temple rituals.

As we will see, the Đạo Mẫu rituals play a big part in the lives of these women who often mention how important their religious activities are for them, but rarely for them alone, rather often in reference to them as family members and members of society.

These ritual processes include not just Đạo Mẫu rituals, although this is our focus; but we need to keep in mind that most of these women include other religious/ritual activities in their lives which may be more or less related to Đạo Mẫu. These other rituals include Buddhist rituals and many less public rituals such as lifecycle rituals (birth, marriage, and death rites), and domestic rituals (anniversaries of family members, etc.). Thus, rituals take up a lot of time and energy, resources and commitment; and a good deal of their sense of the obligations in everyday life is produced and reproduced in and by ritual processes. Many feel that every time a woman turns around, she is facing another ritual obligation. The women live their lives enveloped in obligations that are part and parcel of rituals, especially those of Đạo Mẫu which brings us to the next chapter on how the women of this chapter participate in the Đạo Mẫu temples.
CHAPTER 3.
THE ĐẠO MÃU WORSHIPPERS AND THREE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION AND COMMITMENT

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, the life of a modern ordinary Vietnamese woman was described. It is a life full of obligations. This chapter looks at the women’s religious lives, particularly the religious lives of women of the Đạo Mẫu in order to examine their lifeworld and the impact of the Đạo Mẫu religious activities in their lifeworld. By exploring the levels of participation of these women, it aims to see how the Đạo Mẫu changes and articulates/empowers these women; particularly as they realize their levels of interest and commitment. Life history analysis is undertaken to assess the diversity of participation of Đạo Mẫu women in the religion.

There is no strict requirement for participation in Đạo Mẫu. Đạo Mẫu worshippers have different ways to realize their level of commitment and decide themselves which level they participate in the religion. In this study I categorize three levels of commitment: as a master medium (đồng thầy or đồng trưởng), as a medium (đồng) and as an ordinary worshipper (con nhang đề tử). The most important source to realize the level of commitment to the religion lies on whether one has a mediumship root (căn đồng) and what kind of mediumship root one has. This mediumship root will be described in detail in the first section of the chapter. Each level of commitment then will be defined by one’s role in the temple community and the obligation one has to observe to serve the spirits.

In general, a master medium is the most active worshipper and the expert of Đạo Mẫu. They all have the master mediumship root (căn đồng thầy) and serve as the temple
leader (chủ đền) at their temple. Most of them also have special abilities such as healing Yin diseases, foreseeing and foretelling the future, gaining support or fighting with attacks from the spirit world, etc. Some master mediums however choose to be simply temple care-takers who inherit the temple from their mother/father, a relative or a master medium. These master mediums don’t have special abilities but they know enough about the religion to help worshippers to organize their religious activities and have other people with special abilities work for them at the temple. I have found that most of the master mediums are the first generation of the family to serve as Đạo Mẫu master mediums. Only a few of them are the second or third generation of master mediums in the family. Many of them become master mediums, starting from a point where they know nothing about Đạo Mẫu and self-learn and self-train to be master mediums by observing other master mediums after discovering their master mediumship root.

I interviewed in depth five master mediums. Each of these master mediums was chosen by a different spirit. Their stories show how the process of empowerment works and the impact of different spirit sponsors. They provided invaluable insights on the Đạo Mẫu and how Đạo Mẫu impacts the mediums and worshipper, and how the practice of Đạo Mẫu empowers the women of Đạo Mẫu. These interviews constitute a primary resource for this study. Each master medium’s life history describes how she experiences the Đạo Mẫu belief and practices. These accounts contribute a unique perspective of understanding the religion and real lives of Đạo Mẫu women. However, with the limitation of space, in this chapter I have chosen to focus on only master medium Vy’s

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13 Yin diseases imply diseases which are unexplained by scientific analysis and often caused by spiritual power while yang diseases are explainable by a doctor of medicine. It is believed that the master medium can cure or heal both kinds of these diseases.
life story. Although she is only one of my key informants, I believe, given the purpose of this study that her account is a fair representation of the other mediums I have encountered and interviewed.

While master mediums stay and work full-time at the temple as the temple leader, mediums are active but serve at the temple on a part-time basis. They have a mediumship root (căn đồng). They are followers of a master medium and only go to the temple during special occasions. They often use their incomes from outside temple activities to support their religious practices and the master medium. I interviewed nineteen Đạo Mẫu mediums who came from different backgrounds. Except for one high school student, one retired worker, one middle school teacher, one retired accountant and one retired post office employee, the majority are street vendors and shop keepers. The diversity of the mediums’ life stories overwhelms me with its unique patterns. Like learning about master medium’s lives, I don’t think one can represent them all. However, in this chapter, I have selected medium Han’s story to share with the reader a taste of one of these lives
Figure 6: Interviews with Informants
The third level of commitment to Đạo Mẫu is the ordinary worshipper who does not have the mediumship root but believes in the religion and participates in temple activities regularly. These worshippers are not required to practice the rituals and serve the spirit. My six casual worshipper informants included aunt Din, a hotel chef; Hoa, a housewife; Bac and Trang, street vendors; Hoa, a college teacher; and Ngoc Anh, a college student. Each person’s life history represents different sensitivities and responses of women to dealing with the obligations of everyday life and the connection with their religious practices. Among six casual worshippers I interviewed, I met aunt Di first at master medium Ba’s temple. Like other casual worshippers aunt Di said she did not have the mediumship root. But, she believed that participating in Đạo Mẫu was important for her to make her life and her family members’ life easier. Aunt Di’s life story is not representative of other life stories. However, I want to bring her story here because of her close relationships with mediums at her temple. The life stories of the others focus more on their family’s relationships.

3.2. The Vietnamese concept of a mediumship root (căn dòng)

Many Vietnamese believe that everyone has a “destiny root” (căn số). This destiny root refers to the connection between a person and her or his previous life (kiếp trước) and to the afterlife (kiếp sau). Both the previous life and afterlife are thought to have effects on a person’s present life. Some people are distinguished by having a “heavy destiny root” (căn cao số nặng). These people often face more difficulties or tragedies in their lives. Among Đạo Mẫu worshippers, these people are considered to have the mediumship root.
The mediumship root in Đạo Mẫu refers to a specific obligation of a person to the spirit world. It stems from a belief in the existence and power of the spirit world and reflects the degree to which the spirits may be expected to support, protect, reward or seek retribution in regard to the life of a particular person. The spirit world is invisible but living people can communicate with the spirits through rituals. Before the ritual however there must be belief in the existence of this world. The Vietnamese have a popular saying that: “to believe or not to believe in the spirit’s power depends on oneself” (linh tài ngã, bài linh tài ngã). In other words, the existence of the spirit world is a subjective fact, not an absolute given of the objective world.

It is believed that a person with the mediumship root owes the spirits a debt based on the spirits’ support in a previous life. Thus the person chosen to become a medium is one who has an obligation to the spirits. This obligation can be fulfilled; the debt can be repaid by participating in the activities of Đạo Mẫu. A person with this mediumship root is called by the spirits to be a đồng or medium. A đồng is thus chosen by the spirits. The calling to become a medium is not something initiated by the person herself. This is believed by all Đạo Mẫu worshippers. The anthropologist of course sees this as a form of mystification in which the agency for realizing one’s fate as a đồng is removed and hidden from the social relations of the living community into the hands of imagined beings.

It is believed that there are three kinds of mediumship roots, each requiring a different set of obligations to the spirits. These are: the master mediumship root (căn đồng thầy), the fortune-teller mediumship root (căn đồng bói), and the general mediumship root (căn đồng). The đồng of the three kinds of mediumship roots are all
responsible to work for the spirits and serve and honor them by hosting lẻn dòng rituals. Hosting also requires that they participate in the ritual ceremonies at their main temple and pilgrimage sites. The main temple is called their ancestral place where they are considered to have been “reborn” as an offspring of the Mother Goddess’s family (con cháu nhà Mẫu).

Although the central divinity of a Đạo Mẫu temple is the Mother Goddess, the temple houses a community of divinities and spirits. And worshippers as a matter of ritual expectation and routine honor many of the divinities and spirits there enshrined. This pantheon includes many types of spirits---from those with a closer connection with human history to those with a more purely divine connection, male or female, royal or ordinary, young and old. For all of them, the Mother Goddess is the supreme deity. And, despite a diverse background all of the spirits of Đạo Mẫu are viewed as manifestations of the Mother Goddess, sharing the essential qualities of the Mother Goddess. Thus, all possess the Mother Principle (Nguyên lý Mẫu) 14 including the Yin Nature (Tình Âm) and the Mother Nature (Tính Mẹ) (Đặng Văn Lùng 2004:495). The Mother Principle is the spiritual essence of the Đạo Mẫu and a source of the “soft power” (perhaps here, the yin or ebb flow of cosmic yang energy) which enables Đạo Mẫu women to be empowered. When the Mother Principle is manifested to the degree that everyone can understand and apply it, it becomes a dòng’s principle. A dòng or medium is usually selected by a spirit. Thus the designated dòng usually embodies certain characteristics of this specific spirit while manifesting the Mother Principle in general.

14 For additional information on the Mother Principle (Nguyên lý Mẫu), see Chapters 4 and 5.
For the Đạo Mẫu community, being given the mediumship root binds a person’s destiny to the spirit world. A person with the calling is essentially forced to assume the duties of a medium. They can have either fortune or misfortune, depending on the response of the spirits to her efforts---to reward or to punish. Difficulties suffered by the medium such as unstable marriages, miscarriages, divorces, and separations are called the spirit’s “challenges” (thánh thử) or the spirit’s “retributions” (thánh phạt).

Signs of possession of the mediumship root are both visible and invisible. Invisible signs are often found by a fortune teller. Some informants said they realized they had this gift through their dreams and the actions of the spirit. One said she often dreamed of Đạo Mẫu temples surrounded by a big lake with lotuses (Buddhist icons of immortality). Another said she dreamed of leeches sticking to her skin.

For some, the visible signs come in the form of hardship and tribulations. These are the signs of some actions performed in a previous life which the individual must address and remedy. For these individuals a commitment to take up the calling and become a medium is redress for past sins.

Other visible signs include having the “knotted hair” (kết tóc) disease, “insanity and hysteria” (điên/ cuồng loạn), the occurrence of “spontaneous trance” (trạng thái ngây ngất tự phát), and “poor physical health” (ốm) (Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 2002:82, Ngô Đức Thịnh, 2008: 164-170). Knotted hair disease is considered the spirit’s retribution. It is the sign of a spirit’s calling to the person having this condition to be a medium or a master medium. The hair may change from black to yellow to green and become thicker. The person cannot comb her hair out as usual until she has the Initiation Ritual (Lễ Mở phủ) to
join Đạo Mẫu. This Initiation Ritual is also called a Hair Combing-Out Ritual (Lể chải tóc).

Figure 7: Medium Son Who Had “Knotted Hair Disease” When She Was 29

Insanity and hysteria are often suffered by people who have the fortune-teller mediumship root. Master medium Than who is also a fortune teller, explained:

The ðồng who have the fortune-teller mediumship root are often trained and tested by the fortune-teller spirits such as female lord Đỗng Cuông, female lord Nguyễn Hồ and female lord Đạ Đên. As part of the spirit’s training and testing, these persons are forced to leave home and wander on the street, the signs of a person suffering from insanity or hysteria. They suffer a host of tortures such as eating excrement, jumping into the pond, tearing all their clothes off or climbing to the roof and crying for no reason. If they are helped by their family to host a lên ðồng ritual, these symptoms will disappear. The sufferer will gradually over time become normal again.

Recovery from signs of insanity or other strange behaviors shifts into uncanny powers that follow from ritual disciplining. A spontaneous trance often occurs while
people are participating in lèn dồng rituals. Many informants who experienced spontaneous trances described that they suddenly had needs of singing, dancing, crying or laughing following the spirit possession. An informant said it was because of the spirits’ punishment or haunting (thành dâ) or “catching closely” (bắt sát). Another informant said she was crying during the spirit incarnation because she had mediumship root but could not afford to host lèn dồng rituals. She felt the “self-pitying shadow” (tử đông, tử bóng) meaning she felt very sorry for herself---a very sad and miserable feeling.

Poor physical health conditions are often called “yin diseases” (bệnh âm) such as “pity illness” (ốm vặt) or “false illness” (ốm giả vô). Some informants described a symptom happening to them repeatedly, that they were not quite sick but not quite healthy either. When they went to the hospital, they were said to be quite healthy but as soon they got home they felt sick again.

Medium Lan said that when she was 22 years old, she scared her family because of her ostensibly serious sickness. Every night she woke up with glowing red eyes, muttering and complaining to her siblings. Sometimes she had severe headaches. She often had a high fever but when she went to check with the doctor, she was always told that she was healthy. This happened again and again until she was able to host an Initiation Ritual to become a dồng.

All of this suggests that a calling is not to be ignored, and that the spirits can be mean spirited in reminding the chosen of their calling and their obligation to serve.
Figure 8: Đạo Mẫu Worshippers
3.3. Master medium Vy’s story

The five mediums are older women. One is a 61 year old married master medium who possesses the Mother Goddess of Upland Forest mediumship root (căn Thánh Mẫu Thượng Ngàn) (see figure 9). A second one is a widow who is 67 years old and a master medium who possesses the First Mandarin mediumship root (căn Quan đệ nhất). Third is a 61 year old divorced master medium who has the Third Mandarin mediumship root (căn Quan đệ tam). The fourth interviewee is a 54 year-old married master medium who possesses the Mother Goddess of Water mediumship root (căn Mẫu Thốai). The fifth is a 48 year old married woman and master medium of both the Fifth Mandarin mediumship root (căn Quan đệ ngũ) and the Nine Royal Damsel mediumship root (căn cô Chín) because she practices both as a fortune teller and a religious leader. This woman’s mediumship will be described in more detail below, in master medium Vy’s story.

I have successively visited master medium Vy’s temple and met her disciples from 2005 when I began to conduct the formal phase of my field work. Earlier, in 1999 I first observed her lên dòng ritual in Thai Nguyen, a northern midland province of Vietnam. Master medium Vy is a key informant because she has been the most knowledgeable and helpful informant to my study of Đạo Mẫu, and now we are close friends. She is the only master medium I have met who knows how to do all kinds of ritual activities. She is a master medium, a sorcerer, a musician and a singer. She is also a fortune teller. As the most experienced master medium in the area, she paid great attention about the master medium’s obligation to Đạo Mẫu and the worshipper. She truly loved and took seriously what she was doing.
My first time at a **Đạo Mẫu** temple was serendipitous. During the Tet holiday (lunar New Year), some friends and I were wandering in an isolated area in Thai Nguyen to do some sight seeing. There were few houses in a very quiet valley between small
hills. The path was narrow and full of grass. We hid our bicycles in a big gulley and walked to find a friendly family to ask for some food. Usually during special outings like this we would look for a family which had planted corn or sweet potato. They would boil it for us to eat and we would give them some cash. It was like a casual visit to a new friend’s home, with gifts exchanged as is the custom in Vietnam.

This time, we were a little surprised to hear some strange sounds coming from a house on the other side of a hill. We crossed over the hill to see what was there. When we got close to the place, we realized that what we were hearing was music but of a very complicated type—not the sounds of a CD player playing the latest pop tune. Later we saw that it was a combination of some notes of a flute, some bass sounds of a drum, clicking rhythms of bamboo clappers and a warm trilling voice.

There was a small temple next to the house and it was full of people. People were out in the courtyard in front of the temple. They were rushing around trying to pick up some small bills being thrown by a female dancer on the center stage inside the temple. Some of the people were even standing up and dancing.

The female dancer was dressed in the garb of a highland girl with a dark green skirt and an indigo blouse embroidered with silver flowers. She wore silver necklaces and silver earrings. Two older women sitting beside her were giving her burning torches. She held three torches in each hand and while she danced she used the torches to tease the audience, pretending to hand them the torches but then pulling them away when someone from the audience tried to take them.
The music was very lively and the singer was singing faster and faster. People were waving their hands and laughing and saying to the dancer: “the damsel is so beautiful!” “the damsel is dancing so lithely and gracefully!”

Finally the dancer gave the torches to a middle-age woman sitting in the corner. Some women in the audience said: “the damsel has selected you!” The receiver bowed respectfully to the dancer then turned the torches around her face three times, bowed again, stamped out the fire and wrapped the torches in her bag.

The female dancer then bowed and sat down in the center of the stage in front of the main altar. The woman on her right side covered her with a red veil. Music and singing stopped. The dancer turned her head around and raised her hand to show three fingers and then the red veil was removed. Two old women helped her change costumes.

Now she was dressed as a little boy in a white costume. Her legs were wrapped in puttee and she had tied a white veil on her head with a white belt around her waist. After dressing in the new costume, she held the incense sticks over her head in both hands, and bowed in front of the altar. The music and singing started again. They sang: “The Damsel has left us. We respectfully welcome the Boy-attendant. The Third Boy-attendant rises up. He is only three years old…”

The music came from a man and a fourteen year old boy playing different musical instruments. The man was singing and playing the bamboo clappers. The woman continued to dance and tease everyone like a mischievous child would. While she was making baby-talk, another woman bowed to her and whispered “My Small Boy!”, “My Small Lord!” The dancer then performed the “lion” dance and stopped. Everyone bowed
to her. The singer sang “The Boy has left us to go back to his realm to serve the Mother Goddess.”

The woman then thanked the musicians and the singer, and to the mediums and the disciples who had come to serve the spirits at her temple. The spirits would grant a good year to everyone and to the temple. The spirits blessed everyone with good health, talent and auspiciousness.

I saw everyone had a plastic bag of spirit-favors (lộc thánh) after the ritual. We were given some small bills. One old woman told us this was the first ritual of the year at the temple. Thus, there were more people participating than invited guests and the temple assistants often gave these bills instead of spirit-favors for extra guests.

We thanked her and asked who the female dancer was. The woman looked at us then quickly bowed to the altar and whispered: “My Lady. Please forgive them!” She told us, “You could not call her “dancer”; that was master medium Vy, the master medium of this temple. She was the incarnation of the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests.” I then saw master medium Vy in a white shirt and pants, drinking tea and talking to the musician who was her husband. I walked up to her and was struck by her beautiful voice and her dignity among the group talking to them.

As time passed, I almost forget about master medium Vy’s temple. I graduated from the university and went to study anthropology in the United States. I didn’t return to Vietnam until the Tet holiday of 2004 when I met master medium Vy again. She was invited to hold a private ritual for our neighbor. My mother said it was a Relieving Bad Luck Ritual (Lễ giải hạn). We were invited to have dinner after the ritual was finished and I had a chance to talk to master medium Vy. She recognized me immediately.
She told me: “this year, you should be careful; you might need to have something related to hospitals and operations.” [This happened to be true as I had to have surgery for a previously undetected ailment.] I thanked her and told her I had described her temple for a final exam in a spiritual ecology class I took the previous year in the U.S. and that my professor was interested in knowing more about the connection between the symbol of the two snakes and five tigers decorating the center of the temple. She said they were a part of the Đạo Mẫu pantheon. We then were able to set up a time for me to go back to the temple to meet with her.

One week later, as scheduled, I met master medium Vy at her home next to her temple. The road was totally changed. There was a clean and smooth cement road from the main provincial street to her place. The temple was renovated so it was much bigger and nicer. There were two additional altars, one in front of the main altar and another one on the left of the main altar. The temple was decorated with bigger paper fans and hats and a large statue of the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests, dressed in her finery, sitting on the highest place of the main alter.

Understanding my curiosity about changes, master medium Vy described: “The number of my followers had expanded rapidly in few recent years. Some worshippers became quite successful financially since becoming Đạo Mẫu mediums and they contributed a lot of money to renovate the road and the temple.” “Why there were more followers recently, was it your personal success or some other reasons?” I asked her.

It was both reasons, people got to know more about me and my temple; but more importantly as the spirits let me see, human life had been facing many changes without time to explain why it was so. There were a lot of pressures on my worshippers such as making money, teaching the children, keeping the family order, protecting business’s honesty and loyalty, coping with becoming suddenly rich or suddenly poor and so on.
More people needed help and protection from the spirits so they came to see me.

“How did they think you could help them?” I asked. Master medium Vy explained: “First it was spirit power. This power could support or discipline my followers by serving as resources of protection, help or punishment, and retribution. Second, it was my worldly experiences to help them understand and find solutions for coping with their life problems. Usually, worshippers came to me with questions of life problems and doubts about their behaviors and ability.”

She told me different stories she had experienced. A mother asked why her daughter suddenly lost her memory and could not function well although she was already thirty years old, healthy, married and had one child. When she had a doctor check at the hospital, she was ok. Master medium Vy saw that in the spirit world, the family was being punished because its members were not taking good care of their ancestral graves. Thus the family was told to take care of their ancestral graves while she, master medium Vy, prayed and asked for help and forgiveness from the spirits every day at the temple. If this did not work after a week, the family could host a Relieving Bad Luck Ritual for her.

Master medium Vy also asked the mother and husband about what was going in the life of the sick person. She spoke with them about the family pressure on the sufferer, she being the oldest daughter-in-law, and the additional pressures brought to bear on her husband’s bad behavior in having affairs with other women. Thus, she said the sick person needed to feel understood and to be shown respect in order to recover. Master medium Vy’s diagnosis subsequently proved to be correct.

With over 20 years of serving as a master medium and a fortune teller, master medium Vy has almost two thousand disciples including 600 mediums and over 1000
ordinary worshippers. Her disciples are from many different provinces. In Hanoi, they live mainly in the Dong Da district. The majority of her disciples are from the Red River delta area such as Ha Nam, Nam Dinh, Hai Duong, Hung Yen, Thai Binh and Thanh Hoa.

Before conducting a **lên đồng** ritual it is required to ask the permission of the spirits. This request is made by a ritual master (**thầy cúng**). This ritual is called the Petition Submitting Ritual (**Lễ cúng dâng sớ**). The ritual master often knows the Chinese characters and chants in Sino-Vietnamese from a sacred text to ask spirits for permission for the medium to hold the ritual and for their support in controlling bad spirits who often make trouble for the ritual performance.

Master medium Vy said she used Vietnamese chants for the petition submitting rite and did it herself. These Vietnamese chants are often transmitted orally from older **Đạo Mẫu** mediums. She learned and added more to make her chant versions for the ritual. She said the power of the chant did not come from the Chinese characters; it came from a shared belief between her and the worshippers. The chant would be meaningful if the participants could understand experience and learn by themselves. Thus, she often created sentences with rhythms and lively words to make the chant readable and easy to follow. This way worked for her and the worshippers at her temple.

Because she didn’t need to hire a ritual master to go with her for the private rituals at her disciples’ homes, ritual services she conducted were more convenient and cost less. She never asked for a fee. This was viewed as a gift from the host. She said:

> During special occasions such as the beginning or the end of the year, I work full time at private rituals at my disciples’ homes. For each private ritual, the host family gives me a small fee. I don’t set up this fee; it is up to the host family. The rich family might give me one million VND for the
service but the poor might just give some spirit-favors from their offerings. I always make the time to take several trips to each of the homes of my disciples whether they are in the city center or in very isolated areas. It does not matter if people pick me up by car, bus or motorbike; or if it is early in the morning and lasts until late at night. It is my job to serve my disciples for the good. That is my destiny set up by the spirit world. I will continue to do it until the spirit lets me rest. It was because of spirits’ help I could do such hard work. I often lose my voice and weight after such special occasions… sometimes I get sick during the ritual season. However, I get well very quickly before the next ritual begins.

The relationship between master medium Vy and her disciples can be described as being close but professional. She explained that her job was to be the spiritual guardian for the living people she is serving. The spirit power enables her to help them avoid certain misfortunes and gain good luck. However, she cannot change a person’s fate. Many times, she cannot help her disciples because of their fate. Thus, the best thing is to comfort them in these situations through ritual and other religious activities with the hope to change the spirit’s mind. She believes that it is important to be close to the worshippers at the temple because they need sharing, understanding, and encouraging. A trusting relationship is needed. At the same time she also needs to be professional because she is working for the spirit and on behalf of the spirit. If she is too close to the worshippers, she can harm the image of the spirit she is serving. She said:

In each ritual I often spend the same amount of time and follow the basic canonical order. Of course, for some families, I might spend more time chatting with them after the ritual because they are more like my friends than disciples and our relationship can be more casual than it otherwise would be.

Master medium Vy was the first master medium in her whole extended family. She used to be an accountant and a chairman of the Youth Union in her village. Then she received her calling and she felt she could not reject her master mediumship root and the
fortune-teller mediumship root although she fought with this fate for a few years before she moved from her hometown in Ha Nam to Thai Nguyen in 1987. She said:

I was a wife, a mother and a regular worker and fought with the fate of becoming a medium until the mid 1980s. I was an accountant for the co-operative in my village in Ha Nam province. My husband was a retired soldier. We had three sons. In my family, there was no one who knew about the Đạo Mẫu or the mediumship root. But suddenly, I became sick for no reason and survived for days without eating. I could not work well and became a victim of an injustice at work. Then my family had to sell everything and move to Thai Nguyen. A master medium in my village told me I needed to live in the highland or midland area to serve the spirits because I was being called by the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests.

Master medium Vy told me it was not easy for her husband to accept the fact that his wife had the master mediumship root. He was a soldier and he never believed in the influence of the spirit world. He told me:

I took my wife to the hospital. She was examined thoroughly and the doctor said everything was fine. However, as soon as she got home, she was so tired. She could not cook anymore and when she did cook it was often burned, too salty or tasted awful although she had been a good cook before. She messed up the budget at work although she was an accountant. I was a bus driver at that time. I could not work because I had to stay home to take care of my youngest son. We were collapsed and exhausted. I didn’t want to ask for any more help from friends and relatives. So we moved to Thai Nguyen at her request.

Sitting next to her husband while we were talking, master medium Vy remembered:

It happened as the Mother Goddess had arranged it to happen for me. During the first move, away from my hometown and living in a strange area, I tried to make money to support my family. It was a terrible experience. We didn’t have enough food for the kid. I needed time for planting vegetables and raising pigs. However, while I was working in the field, sometimes a person would pass by and I might suddenly tell her about what would be happening to her family soon. I didn’t know I had both master and fortune-teller mediumship roots. I didn’t have money to host my Initiation Ritual to be a medium yet. What I did was use a bamboo mat to make a space in our small house for gatherings to pray to the spirit. I used a barrel to make my altar and had simple offerings like sugar cane stalks or homemade food to serve the spirits. The people who were the
first to consulted me were some high school students who came to ask me if they could go to study at the college. Then a friend of my husband came to buy our pig and I told her about her pending misfortune in a few years, etc. Amazingly, what I foresaw or foretold often become true so that more and more people came to ask me. Gradually, I realized that I had a special mission to serve the spirits because I was granted the spirit power.

Responding to my interest about how she became a popular and experienced master medium, master medium Vy explained:

I had an Initiation Ritual and started working as a master medium in 1989. I didn’t really learn much about Đình Mẫu from my master medium. I had self-trained by making friends with other mediums and participating in their rituals. Later I went back to my hometown and observed what other master mediums in that area did. I bought some Vietnamese books on praying and chanting. These texts were not specific for Đình Mẫu or Buddhism or any typical religion. One of them was called “General Praying Texts” (Những bài cúng tổng hợp). I could dance and sing and play Châu văn music and I started training my assistants to do it. This ability seemed to be my natural talent. I could not understand it. I wonder if it was because I did have some experience working in the Youth Union-I could sing well and acting seemed to come natural to me. I have always worked hard to learn new things since I was little. I wanted to observe and imitate things that I was interested in. Of course in Đình Mẫu we said everything came from spirits. Spirits’ training was invisible but real and powerful. So I might have inherited the ability to sing and act from spirits’ invisible training.

Master medium Vy described her fortune-teller mediumship root in greater detail. She said:

To be a fortune-teller medium (đồng bói), I was challenged by my “destiny spirit” (thánh/thần bản mệnh). I lost everything during my first three years being a medium. My destiny spirit was the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests. She is powerful but has a difficult nature. When my husband and I had to sell everything we had in my hometown and moved to Thai Nguyen, I only thought of her request for me to stay in her area. She assigned me a fortune teller mediumship root.

Among fortune-teller female lords (bà Chúa bói) who govern the fortune teller mediumship root (Đông Cuông, Nguyễn Hồ, Đá Den and Thác Bờ), female lords Đông Cuông and Nguyễn Hồ are embodiments of the Mother

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15 For a sample of master medium Vy’s prayer text, see Appendix 3.
Goddess of Upland Forests. One with a fortune-teller mediumship root is tormented (bị hành) by the fortune teller lord spirits. It is because the fortune-teller lord spirit has “fortune-teller medium training” (luyện đồng bồi). The fortune-teller-to-be often suffers insanity (bị diễn) or experiences a beggar’s life (hành khất or hành chinh) for a short time when the spirit is calling her. She is forced to leave home for the fortune-teller medium training unconsciously. I was not insane but I could not stay at home. I roamed to the ancestral place (chốn tô) of my fortune-teller lord and their hometown.

Gradually, when our relationship had gotten to be closer, master medium Vy told me another suffering she thought occurred as part of her fortune-teller medium training.

This was about how she was condemned unjustly.

As you know, I was an accountant for the co-operative in my village in Ha Nam province. Before I learned that I had a fortune teller mediumship root I was accused of embezzling cooperative funds and had to leave the community. When I gave birth to my third son, I asked a colleague to take care of financial reports and book keeping duties. My mistake was in asking this person to help me. He then worked with some officials in the co-operative to steal coop funds under my name. I was so stupid and innocent to let it happen. I could not explain anything. That was why my family ended up selling everything we had to pay back part of the funds. For years, I have been working hard to send back money for my brother to repay this money plus interest annually. I did not dare to go back to visit my relatives at my hometown for years. Only recently, after I paid in full all the money which was stolen by my colleague was I able to return to my hometown with my pride. The villagers know who I am and they welcome me respectfully. They ask me to host the len đồng ritual for them. Now whenever I go back to my hometown, there are people who welcome me.

It seems to me that master medium Vy’s call to mediumship may have been prompted as a way for her to overcome her guilt and recover her self-respect in a spiritual way. In response to my question whether she would have become a master medium and a fortune teller if she had not had the misfortune of being condemned unjustly she said:

Maybe no. But I don’t know whether it is my fate that the problem came to me as a spirit calling. It can be something I need to pay back for my previus life you know. So, I accept it as it is. Now I am happy that I have found mediumship a career which makes me happy because I can make many others happy.
When I asked about her relationship with her family, especially after her life tragedy, master medium Vy didn’t hesitate to talk about her roles as a medium-wife, a medium-mother and a medium-grandmother. She explained:

When I was condemned unjustly, I felt shamed of course. I felt bad for my sons. I was embarrassed with my husband. However, thinking about the “spirit calling” and having a mediumship connection comforted me. I could never think of the reality we have nowadays. My husband gradually respects me more and more. My sons listened to me. It was always important for me to relate my family connections to my temple community. Since I became a master medium, many worshippers wanted to join my temple community not only because of spiritual reasons but also for a role model for them in their everyday lives. If their master medium was a good woman who could build and maintain a good family, they would have the same in reality. I thought one of the reasons that made me and my temple popular was that I was one of very few master mediums with a good relationship with their husband. My children grew up well. Our family maintains a good order and manner. Most of Đạo Mẫu master mediums were unlucky in their family life such as having a single fate, being a widow or a divorced woman. There was a common saying that if we did not do our job as master medium well, our children would need to pay back the spirit for us.

She was able to get her husband to support her and he became the musician and sometimes the camera man during her rituals. Her three sons are already grown. Two have finished college and married. Her second daughter-in-law is now helping her with the “divine duties” (việc thánh) such as writing petitions (sớ) for her disciples and guiding them to prepare offerings or setting up her schedule for private rituals. She said:

I hope to have my second daughter-in-law to continue serving the spirit for me. It was a master medium’s duty to find someone and help that person to succeed her in her spiritual mission. If I don’t have someone to take over this temple when I am too old, bad things will happen to my family and my disciples. However, it must be arranged by the spirit—it is not my own decision. If my daughter-in-law has a predestined affinity (nhân duyên) with the spirits, she can continue my work. If not, my successor (người kế thế) might be someone among my disciples or someone I haven’t met yet. Remember when we first met, I told you: “it was a predestined affinity for things happening in life.” I keep working while looking for my successor.
Mediumship has become a career for master mediume Vy---performing a service for the community (and the spirits), while earning a good living, and creating a family business. It is a way that Đạo Mẫu has empowered her.

3.4. Medium Han’s story

I met Medium Han at her mother’s lèn đồng ritual. She invited me to sit next to her with her mother’s guests. Normally, I would sit behind the ritual participants to observe and take notes. She told me openly at the beginning of our conversation: “I am 53 years old, but call me sister, ok? I feel too young to be called aunt.” We laughed and agreed that Vietnamese women use kinship terms to refer to proper age-based relationships. One must learn about the age of a person who you are chatting with to choose the right honorific to use to carry out the conversation.

In Vietnam, the choice of honorifics is not only based on the conversational partner’s age but also the conversational partner’s mother and grandmother’s age. For example, in my conversation with medium Han, if she is a little older or younger than I, I call her “older sister” (chị) or “younger sister” (em); if she is a little older or younger than my mother I call her “older aunt” (bác) or “younger aunt” (cô); if she is much older than my mother, around my grandmother’s age I call her “grandmother” (bà). Medium Han looks much younger than her age but as the custom I need to call her “younger aunt” unless she wants to be called “older sister.”

Sister Han showed me many pictures of her family and of her and her mother at their lèn đồng rituals. I was surprised that she could carry so many pictures in her small purse. It seemed to be there with her very often. She was enthusiastic talking about the pictures and all their memories.
While talking to me, she kept watching and taking care of her mother’s ritual. She ran to get a fresh rose for her mother to pin on her hair when her mother signed to her. She clapped her hands passionately and waved to her mother while her mother was dancing. I was drawn in by her mood and actions. Although her mother danced well, I felt it was a bit slow and stiff.

Medium Han told me:

My mother moved to Sai Gon in the 1970s. She hadn’t hosted a lèn dòng ritual for years. This trip, I am very happy that my mother can have a lèn dòng ritual at her ancestral place while visiting Hanoi. She really misses the ritual and prepared hardily for this occasion since she cannot host one where she is living. As a long time medium, it is also essential to host a lèn dòng ritual at her ancestral place because she may not have a chance to do it again. She is more than 70 old now.

Medium Han could not continue our conversation because her mother had started the Royal Damsel Incarnation. Everyone was very excited and even stood up to dance with her mother. Medium Han hurried to give her a handful of small bills (500VND) to throw out to ritual participants. Her mother wanted me to take many pictures of her ritual. She seemed to be very proud of her beauty and charm during the ritual. Medium Han then left me to take care of spirit-favors distribution (phát lộc thành) to her mother’s guests and perform other services with the temple people.

I noticed an old man sitting in the corner next to the singer clapping his hands. He had been sitting there looking intently at her mother since the beginning of the ritual. I was going to take a picture of him when he walked to congratulate the mother after the ritual. However, her mother hesitated to take a picture with him. I was curious so I asked Medium Han who was that man. She smiled implicatively: “it was a long story…he fell in love with my mom and often secretly participated in her rituals before. My mom only wanted him to be her friend. She was usually embarrassed to see him at her ritual.
However, she invited him this time. That was why he could sit close to the ritual stage and congratulate her.”

A few days later, I went to say goodbye to medium Han’s mother and gave her the pictures we took for her. Medium Han invited me into her house for breakfast. She lived with her son in small but very artistic house. She started talking right after I asked for her permission to record our talk:

I liked you because you seemed to be serious about learning about this belief. Master Medium Ba told me and my mother about you and your study. I thought we would need to introduce the religion, the ritual formally to everyone and outsiders and we need to understand ourselves too. You might meet many Đạo Mẫu mediums; each has her own experiences and observations. This spiritual world is very diverse and secret. You are lucky to meet me and my mother because we are true mediums (động@hotmail). My family observes the religious beliefs and practices because we experience our connection to the spirit world from generation to generation. If you meet someone who has become a Đạo Mẫu medium because it was the fashion (động theo mốt) or a “show-off medium” (động đưa), they will be very different.

I had met many mediums who thought about their mediumship root as a negative condition fraught with spiritual doom. For Medium Han her spirit calling seemed to be very natural and a family tradition and something to be proud of. She explained:

In my family, being a Đạo Mẫu medium is a tradition. My grandmother and my mother became Đạo Mẫu mediums in their late twenties. It is true that the obligation to the spirit is not a simple task. However, it is different from mediums with the attitude that they have to serve the spirit; we think it is an honor to be able to serve the spirit among family generations. It is not only a duty but also a way to learn and practice traditional rules about offering preparations, ritual dances and costumes, etc. We feel you become more knowledgeable and sophisticated by learning and doing the ritual practices. We feel the connection in the family by carrying out the fate of mediumship. I was called by the spirit when I was 12 years old but I delayed my Initiation Ritual (Lễ mở phủ) until I was 37. I wouldn’t be a medium if I hadn’t had medium root. It is my fate (số mệnh). I think if one does suffer from a mediumship root, she should not complain because it is the destiny (qua kiếp). Serving the spirit is the predestined affinity (nhân duyên). This fact gives me opportunities to support myself and my family better although I have to work harder to fulfill my medium obligations.
Every hard work brings a good and happy ending. Thus, there is a saying that “it is fortune to serve the spirit” (có phúc mới được ngơi dòng).

Medium Han also described her earlier rejection of her calling to be a Đạo Mẫu medium before her final acceptance of this obligation:

The Đạo Mẫu mediumship root is reflected in all phases of my life. During my childhood, I could not be with my father. [She showed me a picture of a French man in his thirties.] That was my father. He was a diplomatic staff member at the French Embassy in Hanoi in 1957. My parents fell in love but they could not get married due to political reasons. Then he was forced to return to France when I was only 8 months old. Since then I had not seen or heard from him until two months after my Initiation Ritual. I lived with my grandparents because my mother joined the army.

Later when my mother remarried, I stayed with my step-father and step-siblings. At that time my mother said she knew I had the mediumship root because I was a lonesome child and suffered the separation from my parents. However, since I was so young, my mother hosted an Incense Installation Ritual (Lễ đời bát hương) for me to be an adopted child. This new status would help me to have an easier life, she said. The Incense Installation Ritual was different from the Initiation Ritual. I needed to carry five incense bowls that represented my fate-protecting spirits (thần hộ mệnh). Other people might have one or three or seven incense bowls depending on the number of their tutelary spirits. I wore a rolled up veil on my head and was covered by a small red veil on the top. Then the temple leader gave me a tray with five incense bowls on it. I needed to balance the tray while sitting in front of the altar. The religious leader prayed and asked five spirits to bless and accept me as their adopted child. She would know the spirit’s decision by dropping yin and yang coins (xin dại âm dương). One coin lay with the head upward (nguất) and another with the head downward (sắp) which meant the spirit agreed. Then the temple leader kept five incense bowls at the temple. I became an ordinary worshipper and went to the temple to pray at the twice-a-month rituals (Lễ Rằm- Mồng Mới).  

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16 If both coins lay with the head upward (nguất), it means the spirit disapproved and laughed at the request.
17 If both coins lay with the head prone (sắp), it means the spirit disapproved and scolded the worshipper who made the request.
18 The Twice-a-Month Ritual (Lễ Rằm-Mồng Mới) is named after the specific date that it was carried out, the first day (Mồng Mới) and the fifteenth day (Rằm) of lunar calendar month. This specific time relates to the cycle of the moon. Mồng Mới is when the Moon starts a new circle. Rằm is the fullest day of the moon’s cycle. As a routine, worshippers will bring offerings to offer at the temple or at a sacred place such as private altar at home. This ritual does not require any special ritual custom or ceremony. Everyone can just buy offerings such as fruits, flower, and paper money to offer at the place. While praying the
When I was 17 years old, I had many dreams of dances and I imitated these dances while doing morning exercise. However, I tried to ignore the spirit’s calling me to be a medium. I felt pressure because I could not have a chance to continue my education. I had to work early and faced many difficulties. When I was 21 years old, my mother was arrested by the police because of some misunderstanding. I knew my mother was the victim of an injustice but I could not help her. I went to pray at many different temples for my mother and I asked the spirit if I could suffer in order to help my mother. Suddenly I lost my memory and was sent to a mental hospital. My sister told me later that, in the hospital, I smoked a whole box of cigarettes at midnight, put water in cups and gave them to people as if they were spirit blessings.

There was no way to cure my disease until my mother was released. She hosted the Delaying-Membership Ritual (Lễ khất) to ask spirits to delay my medium status because I could not afford the commitment as a medium at this time. She told me later that she was released because of my insanity. The police hadn’t found out anything but they decided to release her because of her daughter’s health problem and that she needed to take care of me. She explained, the spirit called me to become a medium but helped her to avoid the misfortune. Then I had another Delaying-Membership Ritual because again I did not have enough money to prepare the costumes and worried if I could carry out my commitment to the spirit well enough.

Until I was 37, my relationship with my husband was unhappy. I kept looking for my father but could not find any information about him. Suddenly there was an old friend of my mother who went back to Vietnam from America. She had left Vietnam during the time of the border war, right before her Initiation Ritual. She gave me all her costumes. It seemed like an arrangement for me to become a medium. I decided to host the Initiation Ritual in July 1993 and in September 1993 my father returned to Vietnam to look for me and my mother. Could you imagine I met my father the first time in my life?

Some friends of Medium Han went to visit her while she was talking to me. A high school friend broke into medium Han’s talk:

worshipper does not need the help or participant of any religious master. They light the incense and pray in front of the altar by themselves. After praying, they will burn the paper money for spirits and take home part of their offerings as spirit-fortune (lộc thánh). “Rằm- Mong Mời” is practiced by a large part of the population in Vietnam and by every Đạo Mẫu participant. It is unclear line whether this is a secular rite of the Vietnamese or within Đạo Mẫu only. Thus I called it the bridging ritual which brings everyday life rites to the Đạo Mẫu ritual and will discuss about it in another study.

We often told Han, her mediumship root was her life friend because it was associated with her up and down life. We laughed and made a joke about Han that Han could divorce her husband; her son would soon leave her to marry someone; her mother was aging and would be gone one day; only her mediumship root was with her for life.

Medium Han didn’t reject the comment but she affirmed that her belief and the custom of going to the temple to pray was always an important resource for maintaining family order. She said she had learned from her mother and her mother had learned from her grandmother to operate the temple and take care of the family. The family members were taught to behave well and act as though they were under the spirit’s guardianship and protection. She proudly said that her only son often took her to the temple and participated in her lèn dòng ritual:

My son is a tennis coach with a master’s degree. He went to China for his master’s education. He got that far because I had been praying for him. I was so worried when I got divorced because my son was very sensitive. All wishes I had asked from the spirit were for my son’s success. I did not ask for money or anything else. Everything I wanted was for my son. His success was the most important to me. I am so happy that he respects my belief and practice as a medium. He often goes to the temple with me during the Twice-a-Month Ritual. Sometimes he participates in my lèn dòng ritual and even contributes some preparation money and prepares the offerings with me.

Medium Han was strong and independent. She worked hard and tried her best for a better life but she didn’t complain when facing bad luck. After getting divorced she raised her only son as a single-parent under social and cultural pressures. She said she recently had a widowed man as a life partner. She chose not to live with him but to be a partner, and they support each other. In responding to a query as to how she could take care of herself with respect and be open to opportunities with a lot of confidence, she said:

The connection with spirits gives me the strength. It is the belief in myself that I won’t do anything wrong. I understand things are never easy but we
should be the victims of difficulty. The order in the spirit world is very fair. We can use that order in our living world if we have the connection with that world. Whether I was a casual worshipper when I was younger or a medium now I learned how to serve the spirit well. You can hide from everyone, even try to hide from yourself, but you cannot hide from the spirits. Spirits help you to be yourself and live the way you want.

Medium Han seemed also to be lucky with her beauty and her confidence. When I shared this observation she smiled and said:

At first, I didn’t totally believe in the spirit power although I practiced religious activities at the temple regularly. I did it more out of habit and family custom at first. Sometimes I was proud of the medium tradition in my family. I thought competitively that I not only learned from my grandmother and mother but also extended their knowledge and skills to do it better than them. When I first wore the red veil in the Initiation Ritual, my master medium told me to close my eyes for the spirit incarnation but I didn’t. I opened my eyes and I felt like my head was being turned around by force. I was scared and closed my eyes after that. I surrendered to Đạo Mẫu to be a better mom, a better woman and a better partner.

Learning more about medium Han, her very rational thinking confused me. However, at the end of the interviewing process, she told me the spiritual support was important to her but not to the point of living her life for her. She said:

I thought my beauty and other women’s beauty were inherited from the Mother Goddess. My grandmother and my mother’s life were full of ups and downs; mine too. We felt beautiful and meaningful when we came to her, looked at her, the Mother Goddess, thought about her difficult life, realized how she gave us her resource and authority (lộc Mẫu, phép Mẫu). Her maternal presence gave us the strength beyond my human mother’s strength because she didn’t tell us to live one way like what our mother taught us. I felt it was just the Vietnamese cultural way of living.

Medium Han had a strong sense of her life goal:

It is important for women to have a goal in their life. For you it could be getting a higher education. For another it could be having a happy family or a successful business. Being a medium is important to me because it
brings a feeling of accomplishment. This goal motivates me and gives me
courage to live and work for it as much as for a better life. This is why
other medium friends of mine share that after the Initiation Ritual they felt
comfortable and happy since their goal was archived. Even some women
faced with strong opposition from their families, still practice the ritual in
ways that their families are unaware of because of how their participation
gives them a feeling of accomplishment in fulfilling their roles, desires,
and life goals. This was why we accept the sacrifice of our time, energy
and commitment to serve the spirits.

Among several feelings of accomplishment, medium Han said she really enjoyed
her ritual experiences:

In the spirit incarnation you are the embodiment of spirits, everyone
respects you, even older people. You are the master medium; even people
with higher social status need to bow to you. To me, ritual is a noble
event. It is all about your relationship with the spirits. Thus, I have learned
that I shouldn’t respect my belief half-heartedly. It would just make me
more confused and unhappy.

For medium Han her acceptance of her calling as a medium is life affirming,
bringing her financial security, improving her self esteem. All of this combined to
provide her with self confidence with which she can meet the challenges of the future.

3.5. The story of aunt Din—-a casual worshipper

Aunt Din is a hotel chef in the center of Hanoi. I met her at master medium Ba’s
ritual. Aunt Din sat in front of me. We smiled at each other. She was in her late fifties.
She looked gentle and honest. During the ritual, I had a phone call and needed to go out.
When I returned, I was surprised that she had picked up spirit-favors for me. She told me:
“Here is your spirit-favor from the Third Mandarin Spirit (Quan đề tam). They didn’t
have enough cookie boxes so I also kept 5,000 VND for you.” She gave me the “spirit money” (which is real money given to everyone at the end of a spirit incarnation) by the host medium and said seriously: “Here is yours. I got it for you otherwise you would lose spirit blessings and might have bad luck for the whole month! (mắt lộc, đồng cả tháng đấy).”

Later, when I talked to her peers at the temple I realized that Aunt Din was popular among her peers because she was very serious about following rules at the temple. Although she was not a medium, she knew a lot about religious activities and also the social behavior among worshippers.

She explained:

Knowing and following the rules is very important because it shows your respect to the spirits and to what you are doing. We go to the temple for our spiritual duty. It is not only our duty, but our family’s duty. If we make the spirit happy and make our peers happy we are happy and we make good support for our family.

For months as I was studying at the temple I saw aunt Din quite often. She went to the Twice-a-Month Ritual and sometimes participated in a lên đồng ritual. She was

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19 Normally, each participant at the ritual gets a plastic bag to carry the spirit-favors. The spirit-favor is an offering that the host medium prepares to distribute to the people who participate in her ritual. The spirit-favor with blessings from the spirit is given after each spirit incarnation (giá đồng) equally to everyone. A ritual assistant who is a friend or relative of the host medium or one working at the temple (người nhà đến) helps to distribute the spirit-favors. The distributing of spirit-favors sometimes becomes a big controversy if they are given unequally. The assistant who contributes the spirit-favors therefore needs to be sensitive and flexible. The host medium is supposed to prepare each spirit-favor for each participant for every spirit incarnation. If there are more ritual participants than expected and there are not enough spirit-favors to distribute, the host medium should give some money equal to the value of the spirit-favors and the distributor will explain this to the participant. If the distributor just ignores this and says that they have run out of spirit-favors, the participant will complain a lot. The idea is that everyone goes to the temple not only to give but also to receive something. They expect to get blessed from the spirit. It does not matter whether it is a lot or a little but it should be equal among the participants.
always dressed neatly and looked fresh when she came to the temple. When we became closer, I asked her about dressing up. She said:

You should prepare yourself the best when going to the temple. It is to show your respect to the spirit. You go to the temple for a special duty to make offerings to the spirits on behalf of the whole family. It is an important job and you want to be serious in your appearance too. I was taught by my mother about this. Sometimes, some people don’t take care of themselves well before going to the temple. It is not good.

In response to my questions about the difference between her as a casual worshipper and the mediums, aunt Din said:

We both are Đạo Mẫu worshippers. We participated in rituals at our temple whenever a master medium hosts it. Since I do not have a mediumship root, I should not become a medium. I do not go through the Initiation Ritual for membership or host lớn đồng rituals annually. What I do is make offerings and have the temple leader accept me as her disciple. If I do not participate regularly in all ritual practices, it should be ok with the spirit. If a medium does not she would be punished by the spirit. I can of course participate in the pilgrimage and ritual, and help prepare for other peers’ rituals as much as I can. The master medium does not favor a medium over an ordinary worshipper. However, I think, spirits would recognize a medium as the spirit’s offspring while considering me as an adopted child. The medium is closer to the spirit because she needs to work harder to serve the spirit. It is fair that they get more support and help from the spirit. I would have the same commitment as a medium if I had a mediumship root.

Aunt Din was opposed to some current tendencies of mediums in Đạo Mẫu:

There are people who want to be Đạo Mẫu mediums because it is fashionable. They are show-off mediums (đồng đuai) or fake mediums (đồng giả). If you don’t have the mediumship root, you shouldn’t try to become a medium. The spirit will punish you seriously.

Aunt Din knew most of the people who came to the temple. When I asked her how long she had been at this temple. She said proudly “it has been longer than your age. I went here with my grandmother when I was few year old.” Aunt Din had been praying at the temple with her grandmother and mother since she was a teenager. She recalled:
Since my grandmother took me to the temple, I went regularly with her and my mother. My grandmother was a đồng but my mother and I were ordinary worshippers because we did not have the mediumship root. I went to the temple regularly except for three years after my marriage and giving birth to two sons in 1983 and 1984. Afterwards I made a Repentance Ritual (Lễ sám hối) and continued my praying at the temple. Before 1986, we were not free to pray at the temple and we needed to hide the fact that we went there. I was working for a public food company and I introduced three co-workers to the temple. For a few years we often went together. Then they moved away and only I continued to go regularly. Master medium Ba was a niece of the previous temple leader. Since she continued to operate the temple for her aunt, she often praised me because of my sincere heart to the spirit. She told me “your family would be blessed because no matter where you go, you always return to your ancestral place and take care of your praying well.”

Aunt Din explained that going to the temple and making offerings to the spirits was similar to visiting her aging parents and giving them some gifts. It was to show your deep respect for them and to maintain the relationships. She said:

I go to the temple regularly on the first and fifteenth day of each month. I only skip this if I am sick or during my period--because you are considered “dirty” (bẩn) [aunt Din emphasizes]. If I do not go to pray at the temple I feel unfulfilled or lacking something. While I am sitting here talking to you, I feel someone reminding me to go to the temple tomorrow because it is the time. It is much like a moral and emotional obligation. When I am at the temple I feel comfortable and relaxed. This is not because I can ask for a lot of spirit-favors there. You know, when one goes to pray for the spirit blessings, it does not mean she will get what she wants in life. Since I am not a đồng, I only get little spirit-favors (lộc rơi, lộc vãi) from spirits. However, I can still earn some spirit blessing and fortune for my children and for my parents. There are no specific requests from spirits or the temple leader about which offerings I make or how much I can afford for the offerings. I regularly prepare fresh fruit, flowers and a few traditional cakes, some paper money for the spirits, and some real money for the temple leader and people who take care of the temple. When I do not have time to prepare the offerings, I just go there and put some real money on the altar. The spirits are very understanding as long as I go with a “sincere heart” (thành tâm). Thus, I do not think, the spirits will support people who go to pray for getting more advantages than other people. For example, if you burn a lot of paper money and fill the temple

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20 Before Đổi mới (revolution)---an economic reform in Vietnam which started in 1986.
with black smoke and everything becomes darker because of the smoke, how can the spirit see you to bless you and know your sincere heart?

I went to visit aunt Din’s family before returning to Hawaii. I met her husband, a taxi driver and her younger son. The family had suffered a tragedy--- the older son had died suddenly. She seemed not to recover after this suffering. She quietly looked at her son’s picture for long time. Then she turned to me and started talking about how important the temple is as a sacred place:

In times of sorrow and depression I feel like I need a place to be unburdened. I don’t think friends, family or relatives can help. Thus, I go to the temple. I can pray and talk directly to the spirits. The spirits listen to me and respond although I cannot see them. When it is the most difficult and saddest time, I only want to be alone but don’t want to feel alone.

Aunt Din’s husband, smoking cigarettes and sitting next to her since we started talking suddenly commented:

My wife told me to go and share and find understanding in the temple with the spirits. Although I hadn’t gone to the temple with her before, I thought that with a sincere heart, the spirits would be with us everywhere. Maybe, being at the temple we can communicate with them faster. I support her because going to the temple to pray makes her feel better. For me, I can take some of the money I make and share it with others - beggars, homeless or disabled people you know. Many times I see rich people who don’t share anything they have. I am poor but I can share what I have. It is better if we live that way. My wife does good things at the temple. I do good things on the street. That is Vietnamese culture as I know it. My wife said we do good things as much as we can for the sake of our children. But things happen as our fate. We can only cure diseases but not fate.

While I remained silent and thought about her deep pain in losing her child, she said strongly:

You know, being at the temple with the spirits helps me. Facing unfairness in life, we need the spirits’ support. When this profane world hasn’t been understood, spirits can help us understand. However, as my mother often said if I am happy, I should thank the spirits. Thus, we should go to the temple regularly no matter if we are sad or happy. I find spirits my
soulmate-friends who listen to all happiness and sorrow in my life and I can tell them everything.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter described the diversity of Đạo Mâu participation to see how each woman finds her own way of connecting with Đạo Mâu and realizing her commitment to the religious practice. Despite the diversity of the ways of the Đạo Mâu women’s participation, however, most informants affirmed either directly or indirectly that their membership at the temple is an essential aspect of their lives.

In trying to exploring what their commitments to Đạo Mâu are, as well as why and how they actualize their commitment by participating in the temple community and through temple activities, it seems evident that Đạo Mâu women--especially the ones with mediumship roots---are not all that "ordinary" in their everyday lives. They have had such difficult background experiences, often painful or unendurable, that everyone recognizes that they are "different" from the normal run of the mill women. This chapter, thus, contends that another side of the lifeworld of Đạo Mâu women is that those with the most participation in Đạo Mâu seem to be a little extra-ordinary in their inability to live up to the goals and expectations outlined in the previous chapter.

To Đạo Mâu women, there is a culture open to sharing and understanding, and to the authority of making change and disciplining their ordinary lives through their commitment to Đạo Mâu. Their religious practices attract them because of their spiritual resources for networking and exercising both social norms and beyond social norms. Although participation in Đạo Mâu takes up a lot of time, energy, resources and commitment, it helps the Đạo Mâu women overcome their loneliness and build their personal strength. The empowerment they experienced by participating in Đạo Mâu
practice is personal and spiritual. This is how they create their soft power strategies. It is a power from within which is not exercised over others but over oneself for coping with life’s problems and gaining self-respect, self-confidence and self-fulfillment. These Đạo Mẫu women realize and exercise this soft power by participating in activities at the Đạo Mẫu temple, more specifically in the ritual process which enables them to network and create a community or an exchange with others besides their husband and family. This then will bring us to the next chapter on how these women experience their lives through lên dòng—the main Đạo Mẫu ritual. The next chapters will also gradually bring in more discussions on the Đạo Mẫu women’s community and their relationship with each other besides their relationship with the spirit.
CHAPTER 4.
THE RITUAL PROCESS AND THE OBLIGATION
OF ĐẠO MÃU WOMEN

4.1. Introduction

Many Vietnamese including Đạo Mẫu women believe that there are two worlds---a tangible world of humans and a spirit world which is intangible and populated by a variety of spirits. They also believe that these spirits can influence the lives of humans. The spirits often do this through a medium who serves as a connector between the two worlds. The spirits can possess mediums through different means depending on the needs of the worshipper including: Spirit Incarnation (lên dòng), Searching for an Ancestral Tomb (tìm Mộ), Ghost Incarnation (nhập hồn), and Ghost Calling (gọi hồn) (Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 2002: 66). Of these, the Spirit Incarnation or lên dòng is the main practice of Đạo Mẫu. The Đạo Mẫu spirits are summoned and provide assistance through the performance of the lên dòng ritual ceremony.

In this chapter, I will describe this lên dòng ritual, how it is performed, and the perceived effects of the ritual performance. It begins with the descriptions of concepts and traditional beliefs on which the ritual is based, and the logistics of the ritual. It then follows with an analysis of the ritual process and the ways the practice of the ritual relates to the everyday life obligations of the women of the Đạo Mẫu.

The processual mode of analysis of the “rite of passage” Van Gennep (1960), which emphasizes the “transformative role” (Turner 1964a, 1967, 1969a, 1969b) of ritual processes, provides the key tool for this analysis. Another key analytic tool is provided by Rappaport’s perspective on the impact of ritual in developing cultural and religious values: “in ritual, logic becomes enacted and embodied—is realized—in unique way.” His
interpretation of rituals as “the ground from which religious concepts (the sacred, the numinous, the occult, and the divine) spring” is an important and useful tool for analysis of the Đạo Mẫu (Rappaport 1999:3).

4.2. Key concepts and the logistic of lênh đồng ritual practices

4.2.1. Key concepts

It is important to understand some key concepts used by Đạo Mẫu participants to describe themselves and the lênh đồng ritual. The words and terms used in Vietnamese show the nuances of the language, and the sophistication of some of these concepts which are difficult to fully translate into English. As appropriate, the Vietnamese word as well as an English interpretation of meaning is presented.

In the first demographic survey of 100 people at the Đạo Mẫu temples conducted in the beginning of my fieldwork--- 30% of them said they had organized lênh đồng rituals themselves, 40% said they had participated in a family or friend’s lênh đồng ritual, 25% said they heard about it but had never been at a lênh đồng ritual themselves, 5% said they did not know about the lênh đồng ritual. 21

While twenty five percent of these respondents claimed to know about the lênh đồng ritual because they supported their family member or friend who were Đạo Mẫu worshippers, seventy percent of these respondents claimed to know something about the

21 The last 30% people who hadn’t participates in a lênh đồng ritual or did not know about this ritual are family members, relatives or friends of the Đạo Mẫu worshippers. Some explained they were taxi drivers or motorbike-taxi drivers who hired by the Đạo Mẫu worshippers to take them to the temple. Most of these people went to temple with Đạo Mẫu worshippers occasionally; some went to the temple for the first time when I gave them my questionnaire. They said they were not Đạo Mẫu worshippers. The main reason for people in this group going to Đạo Mẫu temples where I conducted the demographic survey was to help Đạo Mẫu worshippers, such as giving a ride, helping to carrying some offerings or simply going together to support their friends. This is a Vietnamese living lifestyle which promotes a communal characteristic whether one is interested in the activity or not.
lên dòng ritual---and were at the temple because of this knowledge and because they
needed some assistance from the spirits. Their overall view was: “the lên dòng ritual is a
main ritual of Đạo Mẫu to serve the spirits which is essential to be held from time to time
for and by a dòng to gain the spirits’ support and help.” An experienced medium said the
lên dòng ritual “was the main duty to do the work of the spirits” (làm việc Thánh).
Another said “it was an opportunity to meet with spirits” (gặp được Thánh). One
religious leader said: “you do the work of the spirits and assist the people of this world”
(làm việc Thánh và hỗ trợ người trần).

Lên dòng ritual basically is a spirit possession ritual. The spirit is presently
manifested (Kendall’s word, 2006: 164) or incarnated (Nguyễn Thị Hiền’s word cf.
Kendall 2006: 164) into the empty physical body of a dòng---a medium through several
performances or techniques including costumes, music, songs, fragrance, props, etc. (Ngô
ritual has been called by many different names in Vietnamese including lên dòng (going
into trance) rituals, hầu bóng (service to the spirit) or hầu dòng (service to the medium.)

Each lên dòng ritual has many spirit incarnations (giá dòng). Each time one spirit
incarnates into the body of the medium and leaves, it is one giá dòng. The process of
each giá dòng comprises the spirit’s coming down and either hovering (giáng) around
briefly or incarnating (nhập) the medium’s body. When receiving each spirit incarnation,
the medium is required to change costumes to indicate which spirit has arrived. The
medium burns incense sticks, dances while possessed, speaks and grants favors, and
listens to music and songs about the spirit. The spirit then leaves (thăng) (Ngô Đức Thịnh
2006: 27). The performance of the medium having been possessed thus comes to an end.
Although the pantheon of spirits worshipped by the Đạo Mậu includes about seventy spirits, not all the spirits incarnate into the medium. About thirty six spirits may incarnate into the medium during any given lề̄n đòng ritual, although it is rarely to see all thirty six spirit incarnations in one lề̄n đòng ritual. Usually one lề̄n đòng ritual includes between ten to twenty five spirit incarnations. Spirit incarnations are created when the spirit harmonizes with the medium. According to Đặng Văn Lung (2004: 503), each spirit incarnation (giá đòng) aims to symbolize and represent some symbols dedicated to a particular spirit’s biography or depict spirit actions. These symbols enable the medium and the ritual participants to experience another world---the spiritual world [this will be discussed more in the next section].

The đòng in Đạo Mậu don’t think of themselves individually as instigator or leader of the lề̄n đòng ritual. As đòng they do choose the occasion, size, time, place, and guests for their lề̄n đòng ritual. However, these actions make them more like an organizer than a leader. They do this because of their obligations more than an occupation. This is different from the way a Korean shaman performs in the Kut ritual. A Korean shaman is usually hired by a customer to perform the ritual for the customer’s need. She would wear all costumes brought by the customer at the beginning of the ritual and take each costume off after each spirit incarnation while a đòng in Đạo Mậu would change her costume brought by herself for each spirit incarnation. A Korean shaman wearing all costumes at the beginning of the ritual means that she has the power to control the spirit. A đòng in Đạo Mậu has to change costume if she can invite the spirit to come and possess her. This means she only acts on behalf of the spirits without controlling them. The spirit power

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22 Đồ ng vary in the participant levels Đạo Mậu women commit to Đạo Mậu. For more information on different types of đòng, see Chapter 3.
would enable the medium to act and think certain ways but not on behalf of the medium herself. So, some informants said the lên dòng ritual is performed without a leader, following a format repeated the same way every time. Sometimes it relies on group spontaneity, group meditation and communitas. This is pretty similar to what Kay Turner (1982: 228-229) describes about “ritualists” in certain kind of women’s rituals.

There is another term, ghé (seat/shell), in referring to a dòng which emphasizes the fact that the medium is not her own living person but a physical empty body or a shell for the spirit incarnate to communicate with the living world. The discussion of the physical body in relation the Đạo Mẫu notion of emptiness will be discussed more in Chapter 5.

The concept of cốt (skeleton), according to my informants, is the soul or the spirit (Thánh) which is manifested in the empty body of the medium (ghế or dòng).

4.2.2. The logistics of a lên dòng ritual

To organize a lên dòng ritual, the medium needs to choose a good day (ngày lành tháng tốt) based on astrological principles in the lunar calendar. Except for the religious leader who owns a temple, other mediums need to make a reservation for use of the central stage of the temple for their lên dòng ritual. The temple can be a public temple (đền) or a private temple/shrine (diên). The host medium is obligated to pay the head of the temple (and her staff) for use of the temple for her lên dòng ritual. Informants described that it was important for them to purify themselves by eating vegetarian food.

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23 My informant’s opinion of cốt is similar to Đặng Văn Lùng’s opinion (2004). Ngô Đức Thịnh (2007), however, considers cốt similarly to “seat” (ghế or dòng) or the empty body of the medium into which the souls or shades of the spirit are incarnated.
avoiding a sexual relation with their partners and avoiding any kind of violent fighting or arguing before performing the *lên dòng*.

The host medium who organizes the *lên dòng* ritual also needs to prepare the offerings for the ritual. These include paper offerings (vàng mã) to be burned for the spirits, and offerings for decorating the temple such as flowers and candles. These also include food offerings for each of the spirit incarnations such as fruits, candies, cookies, rice cakes, beers, soft drinks, wine, cigarettes, and even small towels (ostensibly to be used after the meal), etc. which fit with the characteristics of each spirit. For example, for spirit incarnations of Royal Damsels (*giá Cô*), the host medium often prepares a mirror, combs or even cosmetics along with other real offerings. For the spirit of a Mandarin, the offerings can be cigarettes, wine, and beer. These offerings become spirit-favors after being accepted by the spirits and after the ritual ceremony ends and are then distributed to the ritual participants by the host medium.

Besides spending a lot of money for the ritual offerings, the host medium also needs to pay her ritual assistants, and the liturgical musicians and singers. She may also give money gifts to other participants during certain spirit incarnations. The money distributed is called spirit money (*tiền thành*) given by the spirits. For the ritual assistants and liturgical musicians and singers, spirit money is more like payment for their work in assisting the medium.

Most ritual participants are invited by the host mediums. Typically, these guests include the host medium’s family members and they often contribute some money in the form of gifts for the host medium. The minimum acceptable money gift is one that covers the approximate cost of the spirit favor that the invitee receives from the medium plus the
meal at the temple that often follows the ritual (sometimes this meal is offered before the *lên động* ritual).

The host medium often spends her own money to prepare offerings as well as the money to give to the temple people to prepare the meal for her ritual participants. Of course, the money gifts to the medium are intended to cover these costs. Generally, most temples have several assistants to the temple leader or the religious leader. They will assist the host medium to prepare food for the meal for her guests and special meal offerings to spirits before the *lên động* ritual. The offering of food to spirits is called “The offering of three basic meats” (*Lễ Tam sinh*) which can be elaborate including three kinds of meat: chicken, duck and pork. To augment these basic meats, food offerings also include crab, shrimps, snails, black sticky rice and uncooked eggs. The food offerings are typically offered outside the temple for the forest and mountain spirits. The offering food is only shared among *Đạo Mẫu* mediums. Casual worshippers or other guests are not supposed to eat these food offerings. It is believed that they will be caught by the spirit to be a medium if they eat the medium food.

When the host medium prepares the offerings and costumes, she must have in mind what spirit incarnations she will summon in her *lên động* ritual. By tradition, there is a strict order to be followed in calling on the spirits. The spirit possession ritual starts with an incantation to the incarnation of the *Đạo Mẫu* Supreme Deity in the form of three or four Mother Goddesses who reign over different Palaces of the universe. These are: the Mother Goddess of Heaven, the Mother Goddess of Earth, the Mother Goddess of Water, and the Mother Goddess of the Upland Forests. Other spirits routinely honored include: incarnations of the Mandarin spirits (*Quan*); incarnations of the Dame spirits
(Châu); incarnations of Prince Spirits (Hoàng); incarnations of Royal Damsel spirits (Cô); and Boy-attendant spirits (Cự) and sometimes the incarnation of Animal spirits (Ông lót rắn and Ngũ hổ).

In some rituals, the invited spirit may not show up. Researchers explain this situation happens because the medium cannot practice self-suggestion (tự kỳ âm thị) (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2007:36). The medium then will open the red veil and end her lên dòng ritual to reorganize it on the other day. This situation rarely happens. Some informants explained this was because the spirit wanted to challenge a new medium (thành thử dòng mội). For experienced mediums, they said this could be spirit’s retribution (thành phạt) when the medium said or did something wrong or improperly.

Medium Han said:

The spirit didn’t incarnate in her one time because she intentionally opened her eyes inside the red veil. Her master medium ended her ritual and complained about her attitude. Since then she has never opened her eyes inside the red veil again.

The host medium needs to have an elaborate wardrobe to be able to appear as the incarnation of the many spirits which comprise the pantheon of the Đạo Mẫu. Besides a face-covering veil (khăn phủ diện) which is used for every spirit incarnation, each of the costumes is made individually for each spirit. However, certain parts of the wardrobe such as belts, hats, and veils can be used for certain different spirit incarnations. For example, the same hats can be used for Dame and Royal Damsel spirits who belong to the same Palace and share the same color symbol.

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The liturgical rules for the lê̄n dòng ritual costume are based on the gender, the status and the color of each Palace to which the spirit belongs. All Đạo Mẫu spirits are divided into four Palaces governed by four Mother Goddesses. Since each Palace is distinguished by a color, all of the costumes of the spirit belonging to this Palace have this same color. The spirits of the Palace of Heaven have red costumes; yellow costumes for the Spirits of the Earth Palace; white costumes for the Spirits of the Water Palace; and green or blue for the Spirits of the Upland Forests Palace (Ngò Đức Thịnh, 2006:27).

Besides separate costumes for each of the spirit incarnations, contemporary lê̄n dòng rituals always require having the liturgical musicians, singers (cung vân) who will sing and play Châu văn music for spirit incarnations25. The song and music of each spirit incarnation is different based on the gender, personality and typical life of each spirit26. However, the use of costumes and liturgical musicians and singers for the ritual varies from the medium to medium depend on expenditure one can afford.

In a sense, the lê̄n dòng ritual performance takes the appearance of a Wagnerian music drama (Finck 1877) with its backdrop of followers, statuary and image representations, and costumes to represent the many characters the medium assumes, and musical and dance presentation to distinguish each. Perhaps the main difference is that in lê̄n dòng there is only one lead character, the medium, who is the producer and organizer, director, and primary actress who assumes the different roles of the many spirit incarnations. In some sense the Wagnerian music drama is more “ritualistic” than the lê̄n dòng.

25 Before the 1990s, many lê̄n dòng rituals didn’t have the liturgical singer and musician. It was called hâu vo meaning there is no music playing and singing, and even there was no different costume changing for each spirit incarnation. The medium only had a red veil and made symbolic sign to imply which spirit was coming.

26 For a detailed description and analysis of Châu văn music, see Songs for the Spirits, Norton 2009.
dàng to the extent that the former is scripted down to the last detail, where as the actual
performance of the lên dòng is possibly more open to the inspiration, spontaneity, and
whim of the actor-medium. The levels of mystification achieved in the one drama or the
other and the capacity of the participants, the audience, to comprehend the mystification
as such could be a topic of further interest, although not one that we can pursue here.

Lên dòng rituals are usually performed on a flat stage in front of the Four Palace
altars (Ban thờ cống dòng Tứ phủ) of a temple. However, nowadays due to the intensive
practicing of lên dòng rituals during Đạo Mẫu special occasions, such as anniversary
months (tháng tiệc)27 of the Đạo Mẫu spirit, lên dòng rituals even can be held outdoors,
in different parts of the temple grounds. A red mat or carpet is often laid at the center of
the area where the ritual is to be performed.

There are four ritual assistants (tứ trụ) (see figure 10). The two first assistants sit
on the left and right of the medium. The one called the “incense hand” (tay hương) helps
the medium to light incense sticks and candles. The second one, called the “clothing
hand” (tay áo), helps with costume changes and makeup for the medium. The other two
ritual assistants sit behind the medium. These persons serve as assistants to the host
medium but they are often her religious leader and an experienced medium who are there
to help the host medium pray and ask for help (kêu thay lạy dỗ) or assist the ritual
participants to make offerings or receive spirit-favor from the spirit incarnated in the
medium.

27 The most popular anniversary month of Đạo Mẫu is March in the lunar calendar—the month that the
Supreme Deity of Đạo Mẫu, Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh died.
Figure 10: Four Ritual Assistants of the Host Medium in a Lên dòng Ritual
Figure 11: Paper Money and the Paper Good Offerings
Figure 12: Offerings Prepared for Different Spirit Incarnations
Figure 13: Offerings Prepared for Different Spirit Incarnations
Figure 14: Food Offerings
4.3. The structure of the len dòng ritual

The len dòng ritual is a multiple-spirit possessing process (nhập hồn nhiều lần) of spirits into the body of the medium. Every len dòng ritual consists of many spirit incarnations. Each spirit incarnation follows a standard pattern: a “departure phase” (a rite of separation) followed by a “liminal phase” (a rite of transition) and concludes with a “reunion phase” (a rite of re-aggregation) (Van Gennep 1960, Turner 1978).

The dòng enters the “departure phase” while participating in the preparatory rite and gets ready to leave her living world to enter the spirit world. A red veil is put over her head and covers her face to mark her movement into the spirit world during the “transition phase.” The “reunion phase” starts when the red veil is opened; the dòng comes back to the living world as the spirit’s incarnation to communicate with the living people. This “reunion phase” ends when the spirit leaves the body of the dòng. The process happens in each of the spirit incarnations (See diagram 1).

Another assessment of the len dòng process considers the whole len dòng ritual as the macro-process and each spirit incarnation is a micro-process. This is a micro-ritual process within the larger macro-ritual process. This process explains the holistic point of view of Đạo Mẫu reflecting the lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women. The women’s lifeworld is not separated from the men’s lifeworld although the former is made by the women and more related to Yin characteristics while the latter is made by men and is more related to Yang characteristics. These two worlds are different but connected. The connection implies that nothing should be viewed as pure lineal or one-dimensional but all-

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28 This multiple-spirit possessing process (nhập hồn nhiều lần) of spirits into the body of the medium also requires the dòng to depart her living world and serves as an empty body for the spirit to enter. Thus, this also refers to a spirit departing process (thoát hồn) of the dòng from her living world to enter the spirit world.
connected. The concept of the macro-process and a micro-process built in the *lên đồ* process is presented into a model (see diagram 2) of how ritual works as one foundation for maintaining the social order.

**Figure 15:** Diagram 1 – The *Lên Đồ* Ritual Process: A Spirit Incarnation
4.3.1. The departure phase

Before a Lên đồng ritual is performed, it must have a praying rite or the Petition Submitting Ritual (Lễ cúng dâng sớ) (see figure 17). This is a preparatory rite conducted by a ritual master (thầy cúng) and his assistants on behalf of the host medium to ask for permission to carry out the ceremony of Lên đồng from the pantheon guardian-god (thần chủ đền) (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2006). The rite can be conducted on the night before the host
medium intends to perform her \textit{lên dòng} ritual. However, this ritual can also take place a few hours or sometimes right before the \textit{lên dòng} ritual. This ritual often lasts about the time it takes the incense sticks to burn completely, that is, between 30 minutes and one hour.

Along with the Petition Submitting Ritual, the host medium needs to make offerings of a simple meal including rice soup, rice crackers, and fresh water for the Worshipping Wandering Souls Ritual (\textit{Lễ cúng chúng sinh}) (see figure 19). These wandering souls are spirits of people who have no family and they are thought to spend eternity looking for support and can be disruptive spirits. By feeding these wandering souls, the host medium wants to gain their support for not having them disturb her \textit{lên dòng} ritual or preventing her from entering the spirit world or possessing by the spirits.

After getting permission from the guardian-god of the pantheon and support from wandering souls, the host medium changes her clothes to prepare for her \textit{lên dòng} ritual (see figure 18). The host medium usually wears new white clothes for her \textit{lên dòng} ritual as a symbol of her purity (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2007: 12) before entering the spirit world. During spirit incarnations, the ritual assistant will help her to put on the spirit costume over these white clothes.
Figure 17: The Petition Submitting Ritual

Figure 18: The Medium Getting Ready to Enter the Spirit World
Although these preparatory rites are time-separated (or held separately) from a **lên dông** ritual, they signal the beginning of the “departure phase” to prepare the **dông** for a transition to be in the other world. The moment the medium participates in the Petition
Submitting Ritual and gives the offerings to the wandering souls is the moment she prepares herself for communication with spirits or invisible beings in a world outside of her living world. She then enters the central stage in front of the main altar of the temple where the ritual assistants are ready to assist her. The liturgical musicians and singers are ready to escort her on the sacred journey with their songs and music.

In the performance of the lên đồng ritual, there is a very thin and delicate line which separates what is ritual from what is secular, of the sacred from the profane. The moment that a medium prepares herself in a new costume with a pure demeanor and a peaceful mind, walks onto the mat, sits there, looks up to the altar and becomes aware of everything surrounding her—the smell of incense, the heat of the room crowded with its audience, the solemn appearance of the spirit statues on the altar—is the moment she knows that she is ready to enter the spiritual world for sacred meetings with spirits or welcoming the spirits to enter into her body. She is transformed and transported into a profound state of ecstasy. After an appropriate interval a ritual assistant places a red veil on the medium’s head shifting the “departure phase” into a full liminal phase.

4.3.2. The separation phase

According to Turner’s model of the ritual process, the medium’s ecstasy signifying the liminal status begins with the “departure period” and reaches a higher and higher level as it approaches completion in the “reunion phase.” In lên đồng ritual, this complete liminal phase occurs at the behest of the medium, or in mystical terms—the spirits, in a series of micro-processes in a sort of wave-like motion or a series of phases during the whole macro-process of lên đồng ritual.
The liminal status, as Turner suggests, occurs as the medium begins to renounce her prior status and begins to move into a new position or be transported into another world or another dimension of reality:

The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a state) (1969a: 94).

In the **lên dòng** ritual, this connection with the spirit world is symbolically made inside a face-covering veil (**khăn phù diện**). This veil is a red rectangular veil with finely embroidered dragon patterns. It is put on the medium’s head and covers her face. It is used to signal the passing of the spirit of an incarnation into the physical body of the medium. The red veil is like a symbolic boundary between the world of the living and the spirit world, and the visible and the invisible world. It is a means of transferring the medium into her journey between these worlds.

*Figure 20: The Medium Enters the Spirit World inside the Red Veil*
The red veil mediates the domains of the Yin and Yang. Đạo Mẫu worshippers believe that red is the color of Heaven and it represents the first Palace in the cosmos which is governed by the Mother Goddess of Heaven. Because red is associated with the color of life-blood it is also symbolized as the color of the sacredness, of fertility and good fortune and happiness. At the center of this red veil, there is a yellow embroidered dragon which is the symbol of royal power. In the ritual, the red veil serves as a powerful symbol which enables the medium to experience the invisible world. It not only hides the áng’s movement from one world to the other world but also hides one’s secular persona and status in the real living world and enables the áng to assume a new persona and spiritual status.

Obviously, in real life, the spirit world is not visible. However, when one can find a means to communicate with that world and even be in that world, the spirits and their world become visible in a contemporary existence. Thus, the experience of the medium in her spirit world through the red veil and behind the red veil is personalized in the incarnation of the spirit in the body of the medium. The medium opens the red veil to return to the real world as a new being, a visible being of an invisible world--- as the embodiment of the spirit to communicate with people in the living world.

Inside the red veil, external influences are voided; the connection between the áng and the surrounding world is filtered through a dim red aura. The áng appears as though in a trance, her eyes are half-closed or closed. And, this enables her to focus intense concentration in the highest quietness and immenseness (Đặng Văn Lung 2004: 510-511). The sound of music, the lyrics of the song telling about a specific spirit’s life, the smell of incense fragrance along with slow breaths push the áng’s mind into a new
status—an active mind in a new form of being as a free mind and a free body in a pure world of desire and sanctification.

The dòng now is in transition from being a woman, a wife or a mother to becoming a spirit. This status enables her to forget all of her everyday life experiences to focus on her connection with the spirit world. It is a powerful state of consciousness because she now has access with the spirit world. It is not her living world. Its power to transform the dòng comes from the inner-most, the spirit-based sanctum of the living world. The dòng, as incarnate spirit, now belongs to nobody, neither her husband nor parents nor her kids, nor co-workers. No one possesses her attention or affection at this moment. She is completely equal to everyone.

However, the dòng at this status is also vulnerable. Turner points out the “transition phase” or the liminality also has “negative characteristic of transition beings.” Because the dòng belongs to nothing, meaning she has nothing. Thus, “the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous” (Turner 1969a: 98). At this transitional moment, the dòng is beyond the real world. She is therefore under no one’s protective custody and she is vulnerable in the mundane sense. In a way, she loses her everyday self-identity in this state, being a non-person: “no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, and kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (Turner 1969a: 98).

Because the dòng is moving into an invisible world, closing her eyes is an important technique to enable her transition in between these worlds. The red veil creates a new space, a symbolically visible space of the invisible world, her closing eyes signifying her action of closing the door of the secular world to open the door to the spirit.
world. Some small convulsive movements of the ñông’s head signify her possession, and being transported into the spirit world. In this transition time, veiling, the closed eyes and convulsive head movements are the signs the ñông is possessed totally.

Many ñông I interviewed told me that if they open their eyes inside the red veil, the spirit cannot descend (giáng) or incarnate (nhập) into their body.

Medium Han described:

When I first had my Initiation Ritual I did not believe what experienced mediums told me about closing my eyes. As I kept my eyes open, however, the spirit did not descend no matter how I insisted on the spirit to enter me. My religious leader questioned me if I opened my eyes inside the red veil? She complained of my doubtful and stubborn attitude. I later had to re-organize my Initiation Ritual.

The period of high liminal status ends when the ñông gives a sign denoting which spirit has possessed her and opens the red veil. Her face is often serious when she faces the audience in a state of an incarnated spirit. Informants described their feeling at this moment as doing the work of the spirits (làm việc thành). Thus, they were serious and respectful as much as they could. If a male spirit has possessed her, she uses her left hand to indicate this. She uses her right hand if a female spirit has possessed her. The number of fingers raised identifies a specific spirit as I describe below.

In some spirit incarnations, the red veil is not opened. This type of spirit incarnation is called the closed veil incarnation (giá ñông [hâu] trùm khẩn) to distinguish it from the opened veil incarnation (giá ñông [hậu] mở khẩn). In the closed veil incarnation, the spirit only descends into the ñông for a very short time---for an instant only--and is thought to quickly leave the ñông inside the red veil. In the opened veil incarnation, the spirit enters into the physical body of the ñông for a longer time to communicate with the living people. This spirit possession manifests itself in the actions
of the dông after the red veil is opened in offering incense sticks, dancing, distributing spirit-favors and listening to the song and music before leaving the medium’s body.

The Mother Goddess spirits often descend from the spirit world to the sentient world but may not incarnate or manifest themselves. Other spirits may occasionally descend whereupon instead of incarnating into the medium, they hover in the form of a closed veil incarnation. The host medium signals when the Mother Goddess comes with her right hand fingers as noted above. If the First Mother Goddess of the Heaven (Mẫu đế nhật thượng thiên) arrives she signals one finger; the Second Mother Goddess of the Upland Forests (Mẫu đế nhì thượng ngàn) with two fingers; and the Third Mother Goddess of Water (Mẫu đế tam thơ ả thuỷ) with three fingers. When the spirit of the Mother Goddess leaves, the medium signals this by placing her two hands in a crossed position in front of her forehead.

Although a few of the dông I interviewed said that sometimes the Mother Goddess arrives at their lên dông ritual in the openned veil incarnation, most of these mediums said it was not respectful to have the spirit of the Mother Goddess incarnating in an openned red veil incarnation. This is because the Mother Goddesses are of a higher status—being noble and sacred women and do not normally want to show their face or incarnation to the public. After all, the face that is shown when the veil is removed is that of the medium, is it not?

4.3.3. The reunion phase

When the red veil is opened the dông emerges from full liminality and is ready by means of a “rite of reunion” to begin to assume the responsibilities of a new persona as the shadow of the spirit. The ritual assistant hurries to help the dông change into a new
costume representing the spirit incarnate. The dồng is now only a shell or seat (ghế) for the incarnating spirit to assume and take actions in the world of the living. This reunion phase welcomes the dồng back to the real world but only in the form of her new identity and not as her previous self. The dồng makes an offering of incense on behalf of the spirit incarnate in front of the main altar and performs some dances reflecting the spirit’s duties and lifestyle---in essence her persona in the spirit world. Anthropologically, the dance routines symbolize what living people believe to be the characteristics of each spirit.

One informant described the incarnation of the Third Prince spirit (Ông Hoàng Bơ), one of the martial spirits, in her village during the American War (or the Vietnamese War as Americans would call it):

The Third Prince spirit is worshipped at Lanh temple in my village in Ha Nam province. He was well-known as one of the heroes who helped the King fight with the enemy to protect the country and people. In 1968, during the Mậu Thân movement [the Tet offensive], there were many male villagers who died in the Southern frontier. My older brother was one of them. News about patriotic martyrs came so sporadically that every family in my village was always anxiously waiting for news about the war. My mother was a dồng and she was also a fortune-teller medium. She told us that she needed to organize a lên dồng ritual at Lanh temple. She said my brother was still alive; she needed help from the Third Prince

Figure 21: The Medium Goes back to the Real World from the Spirit World through the Red Veil

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Spirit to protect my brother and other male villagers. In those days, Đạo Mẫu and lèn dông rituals were considered superstitions only and generally dismissed as being of no value. No one paid attention to its belief and practice except my mother and a few neighbors who considered themselves as dông. However, they rarely performed the ritual. If they did, they often did it at night to hide from the village officials. My mother and her friends only had simple offerings like sugar cane and sweet potatoes which were cut in small pieces and some bananas. They didn’t have different kinds of paper money and fancy paper goods except some symbols drawing on pieces of paper. I remembered we prepared offerings for that lèn dông ritual very carefully. That time, my mother went to Nam Dinh to buy a lot of paper money in different colors. Especially, she bought a horse, boat, sword and uniform in white paper to offer the Third Prince spirit.\(^{29}\) We made a lot of rice cakes and sticky rice besides regular fruit offerings. My mother also prepared a lot of rice crackers (bông nè) and rice soup to offer “wandering souls” (oan hồn) to ask them to join the Third Prince spirit’s army to protect our men in the frontier. After hosting the lèn dông ritual, amazingly, we got some good news from the frontier. Two soldiers in my brother’s squad was reported to be alive and sent to the hospital in Quang Tri. One of them was my brother. This news was spread quickly among villagers. Many people asked my mother to continue her lèn dông rituals to ask for help and support from the Third Prince spirit. The village official did not tell my mother not to do it and did not punish her when she did the lèn dông ritual at the temple again.

According to the informant’s account, the incarnation of the Third Prince spirit was more prevalent and gave the ritual greater legitimacy during the years after 1968 in her village. However, the practice of the ritual was again prohibited when the war ended as being a superstitious (mê tín dị đoan) practice. The ban was lifted after the Đổi mới (Renovation) policy was implemented in 1986.

In general, each spirit has a unique persona characterized by differences in their dress and symbolic gestures and movements, actions and behaviors. In this “reunion phase,” the dông as the personalization of the spirit in the living world is able to

\(^{29}\) The Third Prince spirit belongs to the Palace of Water which is governed by the Mother Goddess of Water. This Palace is presented by the color white.
communicate directly with the living people and help them deal with their everyday life issues and problems.

The spirit incarnate [đông] is given the power of the spirit world. This power creates a temporary new world, the in-between world bridging the living and the spirit world. The “reunion phase” is very important because it is the time when the living people are believed to be able to “talk to the spirits” directly. This imaginary world is made to seem especially real because of the existence of ritual participants as well as the visible existence of the invisible spirit in the đông’s body. This new world or state of consciousness thus enables all of the ritual participants and the đông [host medium] to go outside their ordinary world with the ability of thinking clearly and moving freely within an imaginary structure outside their everyday life structure.

The đông needs to go through the veiling process to get into the other world. However, she has no problem to return to this world without any mediating means since her returning is an act of the spirit. The power from the spirit world enables this world to work as though it were the spirit world. Meaning, that while the two worlds are separate they are linked by this feature---that both are thought to work in similar fashion. As the medium returns to the real world---the phenomenal world--she remains in a perpetual liminal state. She remains part of the spiritual world---the invisible world of spirits and so has certain powers and is not bound by ordinary expectations.

Coming back from the spirit world, the medium also brings a new quality to the real world. While not visible, this quality is felt as a force that brings two worlds together. It makes invisible things visible in forms of communication and gift exchanges. Everyone participating in the ritual process is empowered and transformed into a new
sensitivity of themselves and their desires in the presence of the spirit incarnate whose identity the đồng has assumed and who grants spirit favors to them, and who they can come to talk with and ask for help and support. The essence of the spirit world is thus transformed into the real world as a new life resource. Thus, even when the “reunion phase” ends, and the ritual is completed and everyone returns to their ordinary lives, a bit of the spiritual essence which came as a result of the performance of the ritual remains as a source of spiritual force and insight.

The distribution of spirit-favors is an important part of this scheme of things. It is in a sense a culminating act of the lên đồng ritual because it brings the real world together with the spiritual world and marks the return of the đồng to the real world. The reasoning is self-evident: The spirit favors consist of real value often in a monetary form at the same time this everyday form of value has been in effect “washed” by the spirit world and given “spiritual” favor as true “spirit money,” money that possess greater fecundity than normal everyday money forms (see Blake 2011 for comparison with concepts of baron money in other social formations). Though, again, the đồng is thought to retain some of the spiritual power assumed during the transformative part of the ritual. This is the source of the idea that the performance of her lên đồng ritual has the effect of renewing the power of the đồng much as a period of recuperation or sleep has a restorative effect on a person. The “reunion period” allows them to go back to their life with a true feeling of themselves and in this way is empowering to the đồng and worshippers participated in the ritual. There may be very different feelings they can take away with them after the ritual, such as feelings of regret in having to go back to an
ordinary life, having experienced a more sublime state of being, and for believers in the Đạo Mẫu, having a hope to revisit the spirit world in the next lên đồng ritual.

4.4. The lên đồng ritual and the obligations of Đạo Mẫu women

4.4.1. The manifestation of obligations in the lên đồng ritual

In Vietnam and other traditional cultures, human beings are a nexus of obligations. For Đạo Mẫu women, their obligations, enveloped in their everyday lives, are integrated in lên đồng rituals. The ritual process, in other words identifies the obligation of these women.

The Vietnamese term for obligation, bồn phận, means ‘unquestionable duties’ or “cultural and social expectations,” a term it is fair to say has special relevance to women in their relationships with others. These culturally given obligations are experienced as doxa, that is, the experience by which “the natural and social world appears as self-evident” and which “goes without saying because it comes without saying” (Bourdieu 1977 (1972): 164-169).

Traditionally, Vietnamese women are viewed through their relationships to others as a daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. The traditional lifecycle of women’s lives moves from one phase to another gradually. Contemporary Vietnamese women have more concerns and commitments that go beyond the confines of family life, such as having an occupation and involvement in community activities (Tine Gammeltoft 1999, Helle Rydstrom, 1998; Melanie Beresford, 1997; Trần Thị Vân Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng, 1998; Daniele Belanger and Khuất Thu Ngọc, 1996). Thus, there are different dimensions as they grow older which include family, community and professional
relationships. However, all these relationships create the obligations which make up the life world of women who live their lives fulfilling these obligations.

In this section I want to examine how the Đạo Mẫu women use lễn dòng ritual to deal with the obligations of their lives, imposed by their family and societal and cultural values. And, how they handle the special obligations brought about by their willing acceptance of their life as dòng and worshippers in the ritual activities of the Đạo Mẫu.

If “ritual itself is obligation” (Rappaport 1999:12), sacrifice is the first embodiment of the ritual obligation. The ritualized obligation refers to sacrifices that Đạo Mẫu women are required to strictly observe—stemming from liturgical orders about social behavior and the performance of rituals and ceremonies, and rules of abstaining from certain behaviors.

Vietnamese women become dòng not by choice entirely or of their own volition totally. They are believed to be chosen by the spirits because of some inherent qualities or bad debts they may possess from their actions and experiences in a previous life (kiếp trước). Becoming a Đạo Mẫu medium is viewed as being a “calling,” a means to discharge the obligation incurred to the spirits of the Four Palaces [giả ngự phủ] for favors and support given in a past life. This notion of a “calling” is not exactly what Weber meant by the Protestant “calling” to a mundane occupation of accumulation driven by faith in a supernatural God. In effect, the early Protestant was “called” from within to give his life meaning, while the Đạo Mẫu medium is “called” from without to fulfill her obligation (Weber 2001).

The idea that the performance of the rituals of Đạo Mẫu is meant to be an obligatory response to the spirits for support is evidenced in the terms used to describe aspects of the rituals—the serving the spirit (hầu thánh) duty, calling the lễn dòng ritual
hậu bóng (service to the spirit) or hậu đông (medium’s service). Women “caught” by the
spirits to be a Đạo Mẫu medium have to accept this calling. The Vietnamese phase
referring to the spirit’s calling ‘bắt dòng-chắm lính’ means “catching the medium and
selecting the soldier [for the Mother Goddess’s army].” If they reject this calling, “they
will be hit frequently by misfortunes (cơ dày)”; “Cơ dày is sufferings (illness, diseases,
madness, etc.) imposed by deities” (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2007 (2003): 281). The women of
Đạo Mẫu view the calling to serve the spirits as requiring sacrifice and commitment a
sincere heart (thành tâm) plus patience, money and time to observe the liturgical orders
of conduct and of how each of ritual ceremonies are to be performed.

Unlike the tolerant Buddha, the Mother Goddesses and other Đạo Mẫu spirits are
considered to be very intolerant and thus, spirits to be obeyed. A popular saying known to
all Đạo Mẫu participants is: “Buddha is compassionate but spirits are very insistent”
(Phật từ bỉ hy sá, Thánh mở ly mở lại cửng chấp).

The đồng thầy or đồng trưởng (the master medium) commit the heaviest
ritualized obligation since they are responsible to learn, carry out and transfer the
knowledge of ritual practices to other followers. A đồng thầy is responsible for
organizing/directing her own group of followers and temple in accord with a set of
prescriptions or traditional rules. There is a saying which warns these đồng thầy of these
requirements: “performing the lên đồng ritual [serving the spirits] is easy but observing
rits is difficult” (hậu thì dể giữ lệ mới khó).

In reality, some women who are “caught” by the spirits to take up the calling to
be a religious leader or a medium cannot make the sacrifice to host the ritual or devote
their time for ritual activities continuously. When they make the decision to delay or
avoid taking up the calling, most believe they will suffer some retribution and misfortunes imposed by the spirits and will be haunted by anxieties for not fulfilling their obligations to the spirits. For most of these women of Đạo Mẫu, the calling is viewed as the incurring of an obligation and to reject this obligation for whatever reason is to incur some penalty and the wrath of the spirits.

If one accepts the calling a whole series of other obligations are triggered. These religious obligations are assumed on top of the social obligations which the women are forced to accept in their every day lives. Thus, for the chosen few, life becomes a little more complicated with the myriad of obligations the women are forced to assume. But there are potential benefits as well. Here again, Weber’s model of early Protestant’s sense of being a “calling” is different from the “spirit calling” in Đạo Mẫu. While the Protestant faith was driven by uncertainty as to whom among the multitude would be the fortunate chosen few, lễn dòng mediums and followers have complete knowledge, thanks to a ritual-based lifeworld, of who are the “chosen” few and the kinds of burdensome obligations this imposes.

As the chosen becomes a dòng she can host a lễn dòng ritual and call upon the spirits to help discharge their family obligations and their social obligations. This ability to communicate with the spirits, thus, is a source of power—real or perceived only by the followers of the medium. This communion can transform the spiritual power of the spirit into granting good fortune to the family and followers.

Thus, while an individual accepting the calling incurs obligations to the spirits, the dòng can then use this power given by the spirits to help her family and followers. In doing this, a relationship of obligation is created between these individuals and her. Life
for the ñồ then becomes totally defined by this web of obligations. On the one hand, she creates obligations for herself with the spirits. On the other hand, she becomes the beneficiary of obligations incurred by others for her help.

Here, for example, is a conversation between ñồ Di during the incarnation of the Third Dame—a spirit believed to be the harbinger of good fortune. This recounting illustrates this relationship: ñồ Di in a trance speaks as the Third Dame to the ritual assistants about her own family issues:

*The Third Dame:* Here Nguyen [ñồ Di’s last name], I will grant your husband promotion this year. All the family will be granted good health and safety. Your children all behave well.

*The ritual assistant on behalf of ñồ Di:* My Lady, thank you so much. My Lady, my mother is so ill now. Can you please help her to get better?

*The Third Dame:* Your mother or mother-in-law?

*The ritual assistant on behalf of ñồ Di:* My Lady, it is my mother.

[The ritual assistant asks Di’s daughter to tell the Third Dame]

*Đỗ Di’s daughter:* My Lady, she is 86 years old.

*The Third Dame:* I will grant you and your mother all good fortune this year. Your mother should recover well soon. And your daughter will be successful at her college.

*Đỗ Di’s daughter:* My Lady, thank you.

[The Third Dame: Grants real money to ñồ Di’s daughter and the ritual assistant.]

This communication shows how important the performance of the ritual is. It is the means by which the ñồ can call upon the spirits for assistance, and it is the source of a binding obligation of the worshipper to the spirits and the intermediary, the ñồ who hosts the ceremony; and in a sense it brings the worshipper in touch with the spirits.
The dồng then bears an obligatory relationship to the spirits for giving her the power to grant boons and the prayers of the worshipper. At the same time a relationship of obligation is created between the worshipper and the dồng who is the channel between the real world and the world of the spirits. This web of obligation is clearly understood and accepted by the women and in a sense, is a source of empowerment to help them deal with the trials of their personal lives. For these women worshipping the Mother Goddess has benefits, whether real or in the form of spiritual aid, but there is also a price to pay, the usual price of double duties.

The host medium makes sacrifices hosting the lên dồng ritual to fulfill her obligation to the spirits. By fulfilling this obligation, she is able to channel help from the spirits to her family. This is the means of fulfillment of her obligation to her family. At the same time, by “carrying out the work of the spirits” (làm việc thành) to support the people, the host medium is fulfilling another obligation to other worshippers at the temple. After getting spirit messages for her family, she turns into other friends, relatives or any ritual participant to listen to their wishes and grant good fortune to them—through her spirit incarnations. Again, by doing these good deeds or acts of merit the host medium is viewed as making the spirits happy and thereby wins the support of the spirits for her own family well into the future.

Medium Han said:

It is often said among all Vietnamese women that “good fortune depends on the mother” (phúc dực tại máu) or “a child turns bad because of the mother, a grandchild turns bad because of the grandmother” (con hư tại mẹ, cháu hư tại bà). I always try my best to serve the spirit even though I am under the worse situation since I am also a mother. My mother had that attitude transferred to me. She always carefully and respectfully observed the religious activities. “Serving spirits is our responsibility not only to the spirits but also to our family,” she said. My sisters and I follow her advice,
which means that even if we cannot leave a big amount of money for our own children, we save the spirits’ support as the best fortune for them.

4.4.2. The significance of obligations in the lên dòng ritual

Ritual is “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (Rappaport, 1999:24). Rappaport (1999) suggests words, actions and rituals all are symbolic acts. In a symbolic act you are saying something and affecting and having an impact on something, and you are doing something. Performing and participating in the ritual in public means that you are saying and acting out something or performing and affecting the world or community or group. In the other words, performing a ritual is akin to a public acceptance and acknowledgement of a commitment.

In the tradition of the Đạo Mẫu, performing and participating in a lên dòng ritual is viewed as being a public statement of a commitment to a relationship of obligations---between the dỗng and the spirits, and between the ritual participants and the dỗng [the performer]. Performing and participating in the ceremony in public is viewed as being a show of acceptance and commitment to the obligation. The ritual then becomes more than a performance or an activity. It becomes a symbolic demonstration of commitment between people and the spirits, and the connection between the real world and the world of the spirits.

This symbolic and somewhat spiritual connection started with the act of seeking and receiving help and the giving of this help. This connection then creates a chain of obligations, reflecting a deep belief in reciprocity---that in order to gain a boon, a worshipper must give, and when the offering is made, the spirits must give. This notion of reciprocity which defines the relationship between the real and the spiritual, in time
becomes one of the pillars of Vietnamese culture having an impact beyond the temple and in the ordinary lives of the Đạo Mẫu worshipper.

The lên dông ritual performance thus assumes a level of extraordinary importance for the women of the Đạo Mẫu---far beyond the seemingly superficial activities with which it starts out. The incarnations of the spirits which the medium brings and which the ritual participant experiences enables participants to personally experience the spiritual. For the Vietnamese women who believe in the Đạo Mẫu, the lên dông ritual thus provides them with the basis of commitment to the service of the spirits, and willing acceptance of this obligation. In return for this---through the relationship of reciprocity which links the real world to the world of the spirits, they gains the power of the spirits which empowers themselves as they lives through the many obligations of life they faces. The public performance of the lên dông ritual is thus a statement of commitment to and acceptance of the obligation of serving the spirits, and through them, serving ones family, and the smaller and larger community.

4.5. Conclusion

Lên dông ritual is the most important element of the Đạo Mẫu. It is a ritualized form of spirit possession, a common form of religious practice in Vietnamese culture where a dông who initiates the ritual ceremony and the worshippers present respond by going into a structured, patterned trance---called lên dông ritual. It was traditionally the means to communicate with the spirit world and the spirits of ancestors---to give thanks and acknowledgement of their past help, and to seek advice and help in dealing with ever recurring life situations.
By providing a basic understanding of the logistics and process of the lễn dòng ritual, this chapter explored how Đạo Mẫu women identify their obligations through the ritual performance and how they use the ritual to confirm their commitment to the service of the spirits as well as their public acceptance of this obligation.

This, however, is not all about sacrifices to discharge ones obligations to serve and to help, but also about the fulfillment in visioning, accessing and representing what Đạo Mẫu women desire. The effect of lễn dòng ritual on Đạo Mẫu women’s desires will be discovered in the next chapter in both their personal lives and the lives of their bàn hội (members of the Đạo Mẫu women’s community).
5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined how the lên dòng ritual process identifies and instills the obligation of Đạo Mậu women toward the spirit world and toward each other. This chapter continues to focus on an assessment of the lên dòng ritual from an anthropological point of view. It aims to explore how the practice of the ritual affects the daily lives of the women of the Đạo Mậu and how the ritual process affects and empowers these women in the conduct of their daily lives.

Đạo Mậu women utilize ritual as a useful model for envisioning what a different world they desire of. In the context of lên dòng ritual women are creating a space in which they can access this imaginary world. This is because although ritual seems to be an idealized microcosmic experience, it may be an endurably important means of invoking a new order of things in the macrocosm (Kay Turner 1982: 226), the macrocosm here referring to the whole of the lifeworld or its objectivized counterpart, society.

A functional approach in symbolic anthropology provides the conceptual framework to explain the effects of the lên dòng ritual. Turner’s “processual mode” of analysis which emphasizes the “transformative role” that rituals play in personal lives of Đạo Mậu women (Turner 1964a, 1967, 1969a, 1969b) and the conception of “anti-structure” in exploring the “communitas” of Đạo Mậu women’s community (Turner 1972 and 1974a) provides key conceptual tools for understanding the relationship between the lên dòng ritual and the social order.
The analysis of lễn dòng practices in the previous chapter provided rich data on the behavior of Dao Mâu women as members of the Dao Mậu temple community, which includes their notions of spirits and the spirit world, and the power that spirits wield in their present lifeworld, its previous incarnations and coming incarnations at both the microcosmic level of lễn dòng and the macroscopic level of whole life spans. It provided a means to identify and understand female worshippers’ belief and value systems, their conceptions of the social and moral worlds as well as their understanding about themselves and their Dao Mậu community. It reflected the idea that ritual performance has consequences for both the individual and society. The present chapter takes up this last point in more detail.

5.2. Lễn dòng rituals in the personal lives of Dao Mậu women

For the women of the Dao Mậu, the performance of the lễn dòng ritual enables them to enter the world of the spirits—a different dimension of reality than the phenomenal world they live in. Those who become so possessed visit the spirit world themselves—thanks to the power of the spirits of the Dao Mậu, and the performance of the medium, in summoning the spirits. The dòng is the first to be transported to this world and returns in the incarnation of one of the Dao Mậu spirits. As she is transformed by the spirit which has taken her physical body, other participants are carried up into the other world if only for a moment in time by this spirit possession. The power of this transformation sweeps them up in the frenzy of entering the other world, of another reality of consciousness, then returning to the phenomenal world they live in. All of this happens in a brief moment of time and mundane time-and-space loses its meaning for the
medium and those others who become spirit possessed. The moment is said to be an
eccstatic moment which cannot be described but only felt.

While the-len-dong experience can be a transcendental moment and a public
commitment of belief in the spirit world and an obligation to serve the spirits, the ritual
has a mundane value as well in helping these women meet the ordinary daily obligations
of life. Through their performance and participation in the-len-dong ritual they gain the
power of the spirits, and the confidence which comes with this power to become free
from the rigors of this life, and help them gain the right to enjoy life. The process of how
this happens is something my informants have not clearly described, but the fact that this
happens is clear.

Whether their life actually changes or not and the hardships disappear, or whether
the change is only one in the attitude of the women, the medium and the ritual participant
do believe that something happens, and their life changes. This change manifests itself in
the singing and dancing which is part of the ceremonies and which all of the women of
the Đạo Mẫu participate in and enjoy in an all consuming performance. This energy
carries over to the conduct of their real lives and empowers them by giving them coping
skills in dealing with the problems of ordinary life. These coping skills as
acknowledging by my informants include organizational and leadership skills, social
skills, self-fulfillment and development of personal pride, support network, spiritual
power, financial security and career options and self-respect and gender identity.

Ritual is the mystification of the actual social world. It is important to
acknowledge that under pre-capitalist social formations, “the ordinary people can see
through their own mystification” (Blake, forthcoming). Unconcerned with the epistemic
underpinnings or its artifice, so long as the artifice is genuine in its ritual performance, they appreciate the power of the mystery in their lives. Đạo Mậu women are aware of and see through their mystification as well. In a way, this ritual awareness gives their real world values a mystical sensibility, a spiritual connection which is powerful as it is based on a sense of personal connection with the other, spiritual world. Through this connection the women of the Đạo Mậu become aware of the meanings and values of their previous lives and benefits brought and given by their predecessors and descendants in both microcosmic and macrocosmic senses.

To discover the meanings of:len dòng ritual performances in the personal life of Đạo Mậu women is to see through the symbolism of the ritual. It is to discover how these symbolic acts entail the social and cultural values and transform these values for human attitudes and behaviors. The ritual symbol varies in objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units (Turner 1967:19).

5.2.1. **Lên dòng rituals and the empowerment of the women of Đạo Mậu**

This section explores how the transference is made between the sacred communitas of the len dòng and the more mundane community of family and kinship and work of the women of Đạo Mậu as family members rather than the community of women. The practice of the len dòng ritual serves many functions in the lives of the women of Đạo Mậu. It provides these women an opportunity to form a spiritual identity; it provides them with a social network for meeting women and developing social and leadership skills, gives some of them a chance to make money and provide for themselves by becoming mediums and merchants supporting temple activities. The ritual practice also becomes a center for social and cultural activities which cater to the
women’s need for amusement and entertainment and leisure time activities but in ways that are entirely in keeping with traditional ideas and values. Performance of the ritual is an important means for Đạo Mẫu women to access a sacred space and experience themselves as divine beings able to carry out their obligations to care for family members by enlisting the help of the spirits.

Indeed the practice of the lênh đồng ritual empowers women in many aspects of their lifeworld instead of denigrating them to second class status. It helps them create a self identity which enables women to feel better about themselves and able to deal with life situations more effectively, and more capable to change and enabling the change of others.

Acknowledging her physical beauty and having a better feeling of the self and life are the first step of change within the medium. The experience of seeing herself as the spirit also has the effect of giving the medium the power of the spirit incarnate within the medium. The Đạo Mẫu medium thus can use the ritual to change the world view and mental state of the others by giving them a chance to participate in her performance vicariously. In so doing she gives the participant a chance to see themselves as she and by this means begins to change their attitude about themselves. By giving them this opportunity she is able to give them a confidence, and power as it were, that transfers to real life situations. This, I believe is the value and power of Đạo Mẫu for the ordinary women—-the ability to create a new persona for them, focused on the example or role model the medium becomes.

The experience of seeing themselves as Đạo Mẫu spirits is psychologically important for Đạo Mẫu women to address desires and anxieties. Seeing themselves as an
empty body for spirits incarnating, Dao Mâu women realize how their body can define and condition life experience as well as give them personality and continuity. They are realizing the body is their first and last outward reality (Kay Turner 1982:229). In the context of performing the ritual, the women thus secure the right to be beautiful, charming, and attractive as well as to be recognized and proud of their beauty. In other words, it becomes socially acceptable to be vain and focused on physical beauty, even while social mores require a modest behavior in real life. The lênh đồng ritual thus gives women a chance to step out of their ordinary lives and become a fantasy figure, if only for the duration of the ritual performance.

This focus on physical appearance is symbolized by the placement of a mirror at the center behind the main altar in front of the medium. This sacred mirror is only used during lênh đồng rituals. The Dao Mâu medium, while being dressed by the ritual assistant or before starting each spirit dance, often looks at herself in this mirror to affirm a satisfactory appearance. The process of dressing up is not a private affair, as it might be in real life, but it becomes a public event and it happens right in the center of the ritual stage in front of all ritual participants. When satisfied with her appearance the medium rewards the ritual assistant with a lot of spirit money (which is her real money) making this a lucrative career option for this ritual assistant who serves like a personal stylist for the medium.

During the ritual performance, participants will shower the medium effusively with praise, loudly commenting with the nicest words about how beautiful, charming and attractive she is. In this instance the medium may often reward her followers with spirit money or spirit favors, thus generating an even louder wave of praise. The performance
comes to resemble, superficially at least, a rock concert in the West in terms of the excited and frenzied exchange between performer and audience. This performance thus becomes more than an interaction between the spirit world and the real world and the incarnation of a spirit in the body of the medium. It also becomes a symbolic display of the pride of women in being a woman as her own desire.

While real life requires a modest and a gentle demeanor of the women of the Đạo Mẫu, the ritual performance provides the medium and the participants vicariously, with a chance to let a more passionate persona appear. Because the spirit incarnation manifests itself in the medium in the form of her dancing and acting, her body and her appearance is the locus of transformation. The performance thus becomes a celebration of beauty and passion. Thus, the success of Ấn dòng ritual performance is measured as much by the beauty of the performance and the satisfaction gained by the women, as by its effectiveness in gaining spirit support and help.

As the spirit possesses the medium many of the followers believe that an inner beauty different from ordinary physical beauty is released and appears in the medium. Many of the ritual participants become mesmerized by the passion of the medium’s performance and the interplay between the participants and the medium, and they feel themselves to be transformed into beautiful women. They become more aware of their own physical attractiveness and of their control over their own body.

Medium Na expressed her feeling as one that makes her feel like a queen or king or princess while performing the Ấn dòng ritual. She said:

I can dress up in beautiful costumes in each spirit incarnation. One dares not wear such special costumes and dance while listening to sacred music and songs [Châu văn] about the life of spirits in everyday life. People would think you are crazy. But at the Ấn dòng ritual, everyone praises
you: “Great Mandarin, you look so elegant” (Lạy quan, Quan thật là phong nhã); “My Lady, you are so beautiful” (Lạy Mẫu, Mẫu đẹp quá). It is really special, joyful and comfortable to feel that. Thus, I always design my costumes and renew them every year. I not only follow the basic design of Đạo Mẫu costumes but learn from movies, books and other friends’ costumes to design mine. They are really nice as you have seen at my ritual.

The wholeness of the ritual with the exhortation of the ritual participants, the sound of music, the incense smell and the bitter, spicy and the intoxication of liquor, cigarette and bitter nut, all combine to make the medium feel passionate and special.

Sometime she even can go into a state of ecstasy.

I observed medium Thuy with a red face and sparkling eyes and charming movement which made her totally different from herself in everyday life. She said she felt beautiful and glamorous. Whenever she participated in the lên đồng ritual, she sang and danced with passion. Where she always felt repressed in real life, the ritual performance gave her a chance to let her repressed feelings disappear and be transformed and transported into another reality, even if for a while only. It allowed her to be a beautiful and desirable woman even though she might have been middle aged and dowdy in appearance in real life. Promoting this fantasy life thus becomes a special empowerment of the Đạo Mẫu to its women.

Master medium Minh explained about the happiness she felt sitting on the red mat on the stage:

It’s like I am in a heaven that is very close to my real life. There is no need to wait for that heaven until our afterlife. I may not know what afterlife will be. But, why do I need to bother about happiness in that life? I want to enjoy it in the present real life. While practicing lên đồng rituals I get this happiness because I feel special and important.

Medium Ba added:
You are the spirit being served by other ritual participants. Everyone has to bow to you respectfully, and call you “My Lord,” “My Lady” (lạy Mẫu), Great Mandarin (lạy Quan) and Great Dame (lạy Châu). You are able to give advice and comfort them. Everyone is very grateful to you.

The flow of these feelings, change in feelings, or the sharing of feelings with others is a special outcome achieved by the performance of the ritual. As a result, the validity of each of the women—the medium and participants feeling better and exhilarated becomes the mode of revelation, communication, and transvaluation promoted by ritual practices. It is demonstrated by the medium’s state of becoming super-passionate, super-generous and sublimated (bốc dòng, vở gói, thăng hoa) (See figure 22).

Figure 22: Being Super-Generous

There is a popular saying known to most of Đạo Mẫu women: “The best [happiness] is to sit on the red mat to serve the spirit; the second is to get married with a mandarin” (Thứ nhất ngồi dỗ, thứ nhị là lấy chồng quan). “Wearing the red veil” is a common expression of performing lên dỗ, the spirit serving ritual. To a Đạo Mẫu medium, wearing the red veil to serve the spirit refers to not only the better feeling but the best feeling, to feel the past, the present as well as the future. It is because the ritual
practice offers more than what an ordinary life can offer. It is something beyond the
ordinary and very authentic, special to the meaning of the medium’s life. It is the feeling
of moving from the life full of obligations to a life of being free of both her mind and her
body, yet in no way renouncing those mundane obligations and responsibilities.

This feeling is fostered by linking the desire world of Đạo Mẫu women to the
sequence of a лên dòng ritual. Đạo Mẫu women create the whole picture of a good life
changing from being very serious and formal to being more casual and playful; from a
mature world full of responsibilities to a pure and innocent world which is full of
joyfulness. A full лên dòng ritual ceremony has up to thirty six incarnations (giá dòng)
including the incarnations of the Mother Goddesses (Thánh Mẫu), General Trần Hùng
Đạo, the Mandarin Spirits (Quan), the Dame Spirits (Châu), the Prince Spirits (Ông
hoàng), the Royal Damsel Spirits (Cô), the Boy-Attendant Spirits (Cậu) and the Animal
Spirits – five Tigers (Ngũ hổ) and two Snakes (Ông lọt rắn)\(^{30}\). The ritual for each
incarnation is performed differently based on the position of each spirit in the hierarchy
and capacity of each spirit.

The Mother Goddesses who govern the different palaces of the cosmos, viewed as
the noblest spirits come first. The incarnations of the Mother Goddesses are quiet and
serene, reflecting their stature. Rarely is the red veil opened for the Mother Goddess to
meet or talk with the worshippers. The incarnation appears as a symbol that the Mother
Goddess spirit is blessing the host medium and other ritual participants before the other
spirit incarnations appear (see figure 22). The incarnations of Mandarin and Dame spirits

\(^{30}\) Some researchers prefer to translate Dames as Royal Ladies, Royal Damsel as Young Princesses and
lọt rắn) are rarely possessed.
are also solemn and serious because they are high officials working for the state authority in their incarnation. Thus, the medium’s face, movement, gestures are very serious. These spirits rarely smile or act friendly with the ritual participants (See figures 23, 24). For example, the First Mandarin comes from Heaven to help people receive justice; the Fifth Mandarin fights with the enemy to protect the country; the Second Dame governs 81 mountain and forest gates while the Tenth Dame helps King Lê Lợi expel the Ming Dynasty Chinese enemy from the North. All of these incarnations cause the medium to maintain a serious demeanor.

However, the incarnation of the Prince, Royal Damsel or Boy-Attendant spirits are more casual and friendly because these spirits are freer from the official duties. They communicate casually to the ritual participants and their incarnations appear smiling, joking, and teasing. Their dances and gestures become much more animated and fun to watch. For example, the Royal Damsels and Boy-Attendant spirits are young girl and boy spirits who have no duty except playing and enjoying the world. Their dances are very lively, vivid and vivacious. During these incarnations, many worshippers clap their hands, sing and dance with the host medium (See figures 25, 26, 27).

The sequence of spirit incarnations in a lê̂n đông ritual, which move from seriousness to playfulness, from a very formal and almost somber performance to casual and lively performances, communicates the “soft power” strategy of Đạo Mẫu women in living their life the way they want. This is because that sequence reflects both their obligatory commitments in the everyday world and the desires of another world they like--an imaginary world in which they are totally free and happy with a child-like nature.
Figure 23: The Mother Goddess Spirit Incarnations
Figure 24: The Mandarin Spirit Incarnations
Figure 25: The Dame Spirit Incarnations
Figure 26: The Prince Spirit Incarnations
Figure 27: The Royal Damsel Spirit Incarnations
The medium has the power to serve as links, as surrogates to connect different realms of reality and facilitate change in people by embodying change. The Đạo Mẫu medium considers any thought or fantasy real to the degree that it influences action in present. This is where the ritual perception fits well in secular culture. The medium incarnating the spirit sees herself as the spirit in all activities, she makes no separation between her religious ideas and her worldly behavior. Thus, if a spirit disciplines the world with the ethic of the spirit world, the medium can apply this ethic to advise or help her worshippers and herself in disciplining the family and other communities they have relationships with. It is a Turnerian theme to view how the process of lễ ng rituals creates a mystified context for one to disobey the social norms in their thought, self-understanding, and to make appropriate behavior. In his own words, Turner states a ritual “can cause in some cases real transformations of character and of social relationship” (1974:56). Thus, relationships which are impossible to be changed or disciplined in real life can be handled through ritual practice.
Medium Phuc described how her husband changed his behavior illustrating how the ritual provides women with the license to criticize otherwise implacable powers.

At my lèn dòng ritual last year (2008), the Third Dame spirit [incarnated in medium Phuc] yelled at my husband. She was so angry at him because he was an irresponsible husband and father. My husband was stubborn and argued with the Dame spirit. She listed what he did wrong like stealing my money to gamble, drinking until drunk and coming home late, ignoring the children, etc. She told him to change if he did not want to be punished. Can you imagine? His face turned red and green. He was then very quiet in front of everyone while listening to the spirit’s warnings. Amazingly, since then he has gradually changed his behavior.

Medium Di talked about her family’s involvement in the lèn dòng ritual:

My youngest son doesn’t work and think as a mature man although he is over 30 years-old. He often roams and plays with unemployed men and drunks. My husband and I own a small metal forging shop in the suburbs of Hanoi. We really want him to get married and run our shop. However, he ignores every word we tell him. In 2007, I insisted he help prepare for my ritual. He finally attended my ritual. During the incarnation of the Seventh Prince [incarnated into medium Di], the spirit yelled at him about his misbehaviors, boxed his ears and requested that he become a medium. He was very scared. I then helped him prepare for his Initiation Ritual to become a Đạo Mẫu medium. Since then, however, he has not been devout to the spirit. So he has not changed much yet. I keep praying to the Mother Goddess to forgive him and help him to be a better person. His master medium told me after becoming 34 years-old he would reach the threshhold of his destiny (đỉnh sỏ) and he would be better.

The spiritual power the medium absorbed during the lèn dòng ritual enables people to incline to goodness (huướng thiên) and to influence (cảm hóa) people to become more compassionate in dealing with others. Spiritual power also enables the worshippers to model their thoughts and behaviors according to moral values.

Master medium Minh stated: “because of the law of cause and effect (luật nhân quả), those who appreciate Đạo Mẫu will appreciate the kindness of the spirits and have fear of the spirit’s retribution (thánh phạt).”

Medium Tu told about her efforts to maintain a good family order by encouraging
her children to participate in the lềnh đồng ritual:

After 40 years practicing lềnh đồng rituals, I understand and follow the spirit’s advice. It is essential for Đạo Mẫu mediums to understand and practice righteousness and generosity (đức độ). Our serving spirit duty and the spirits transform (giáo hóa) us to think and act that way. I try to encourage my daughters and daughter-in-law as well as other female friends to participate in Đạo Mẫu religion because this would make them kind and thoughtful naturally. This is how I teach my children to maintain good family relationships.

Nam, medium Ba’s son explained how the Đạo Mẫu contributes to personal values:

Spiritual values encourage Đạo Mẫu worshipers to incline to goodness. The need of practicing the ritual lies on their understanding about everyday life reality. So, the obligation to the spirit is also the obligation to be a good person. That is why Đạo Mẫu worshipers often say that: “if you lose your moral (thất đức) why do you go to the temple and participate at the lềnh đồng ritual?”

Medium Na described how the observance of ritual helped deal with stress and changed her persona:

I feel more settled down and much calmer when I become a Đạo Mẫu medium. I was a hot-tempered, up-and-down person but I have changed to be calmer and more reasonable. I also see many street vendors who used to talking louder with many cuss words, smoking cigarettes³¹ have changed their behaviors when they participate in the lềnh đồng ritual. They quit smoking, talked gentler, using fewer cuss words. One of them told me she didn’t cheat people any more. Of course as a vendor she needs to sell more expensive than the price she buys. However, she doesn’t tell a lie or give the bad product to careless customers.

For many Đạo Mẫu women, being able to host a lềnh đồng ritual is a big achievement because they believe they can then fulfill their obligation to the spirits and gain the spirit’s support. This is even a bigger achievement when they need to overcome financial difficulties to put on the ritual.

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³¹ Smoking is not considered appropriate for Vietnamese women.
Medium Di said:

When I saved enough money to host my Initiation Ritual, I was so happy. I had struggled to prepare for a long time for this event. It was different from worrying about organizing my son’s wedding or any kind of family anniversary. I needed to work harder because it was my own duty. I also needed to prepare for this ritual very carefully because it was a “serving spirit duty.” You should not make any mistakes. However, I didn’t feel tired or wasteful. It was a very cheerful event although I was pretty stressed out.

In addition, this is an achievement in a sense that it is an opportunity for them to show how skillful they are in organizing such a complicated ritual. It also gives them a chance to demonstrate how talented they are in performing the ritual which involves costume preparation, as well as an ability to dance and act.

Medium Huong could write poems and sang well. At her len dong ritual in 2009, during the Tenth Prince spirit incarnation, she performed by writing a poem and reading it aloud; then she sang quan họ to tease her audience during the incarnation of the Youngest Royal Damsel spirit. She performed it so well that everyone stood up and clapped their hands to congratulate her during the ritual performance at master medium Ba’s temple.

5.2.2. Lên dòng rituals and the mystification of material values

The Vietnamese think that “the spirit world (the Yin world) is similar to the real world (the Yang world)” (trần sao âm vây). Thus it is not only essential to serve the spirit with all the needs of the living but it is also possible to ask spirits to support all kinds of needs in the living world.

A host medium performs two essential duties in her performing the work of the spirits (lắm việc Thánh) at the lên dòng ritual. The first duty is to make all of the real and

32 A traditional folk genre of singing which originated in Bắc Ninh province in northern Vietnam.
paper offerings for the spirit. This offering is to make sure that the spirit is materially 
served and with honor. The second duty is to distribute spirit-favors, and spirit money to 
the worshippers attending in the name of the spirit incarnating in her physical body.

The intent of these duties is not to have the host medium show off how wealthy 
she is. It is rather an opportunity for her to show her sincere-heart (thành tâm) and 
commitment to the spirit. There is no rule for how much money the host medium has to 
spend for her lẻn dòng ritual. It is said that “offerings are made based on what one can 
afford” (tùy tiền biên lẻ) or that people should “prepare more if they have more and less if 
they have less” (giàu làm kép, hếp làm đom). The spirits don’t punish you if you prepare 
less expensive offerings and they don’t reward you if you prepare more expensive 
offerings. They only judge whether you follow the right liturgical order.

Real money in small denominations ---bills such as, 500 or 1000 VND is prepared 
for the purpose of distributing spirit money in advance of the ceremony. All bills are 
arranged like a fan in the host medium’s hands while she is dancing. At the most exciting 
moment she throws all the money to the audience and the audience scrambles to get as 
much as they can.

In the Royal Damsel incarnations, the worshippers often stand up to dance or sing 
as if they are caught up in the moment and let the spirit of the Royal Damsel spirit 
incarnation fill their own bodies. They shout exuberant praises to the spirit: “Damsel 
dances so nicely!” (Cô nhảy đẹp quá), “Damsel is very beautiful” (Cô đẹp quá). They 
sometimes even ask in a baser moment: “Damsel, please make rain [meaning distribute 
spirit money]” (Cô mưa đì). This phenomenon of “audience participation” makes Đạo 
Mâu rituals interesting, crowded, fun and casual.
The requesting of this spirit money reflects the worshipper’s desire of having financial help from the spirit. They believe that if they get this real money in the form of spirit-favors and spirit money from the medium or the spirit they can make more money or have good fortunes in reality. The spirit-favor and spirit money given have special values because they are given in the name of and by means of a spirit possessing the host medium. There is a popular saying known to Đạo Mẫu worshippers: “one piece of spirit-favor is equally worth a load of profane gifts” (một miếng lộc Thành bằng một gánh lộc trần). What is important to the receiver is not the actual value of the gift. The most important thing for both the giver and the receiver is the symbolic value of the gifts---recognizing their own efforts to fulfill their obligations to their family and to the spirits, and their success in receiving gifts from these spirits to help them achieve their personal goals.

The mother of a friend of mine, then in her 90s took pleasure telling me stories of her annual attendance at the Christmas parade every year in Honolulu. Standing along the streets and scrambling with the children for the pieces of candy thrown by people dressed as Santa Claus and his elfin helpers, racing in front of the littlest children. She would tell me how she fully enjoyed the competition of getting as much candy thrown to the street as she could much to the embarrassment of her son. She claimed that getting the candy was not about having the candy to eat, but that for her the candy was a symbol of good luck and the Christmas spirit given by Santa Claus---to be shared with others. She said she then distributed her candy to the littlest kids who did not get their share, and kept some for family members who were not at the parade including her husband long since deceased. This act of sharing gave her a lot of satisfaction. This description of
scrambling for the Christmas spirit-favors in Honolulu always reminds me of the lễ dồng ceremony in Vietnam when the worshippers do much the same and with similar purposes and motives. Both communicate the friendships among human beings and between human beings and spirits. Again, it illustrates the main theme of the lễ dồng ritual which is about the ethical similarity of both the spirit and the real world. As Blake states: “This ‘redistribution’ is no potlatch since the money handed out is limited to the patron’s own expense account; she is not expressing her abandonment of worldly property, and there is no explicable intention to humiliate her guests, although I would argue that there is a definite social animus in this redistributive, sharing gesture” (forthcoming).

Dao Mâu women, in their own words, enthusiastically address the meaning of these symbolic actions: “serving the noble and powerful spirits, meeting with them, getting their spirit-favors and spirit money, how can you dislike it?”

On the other hand, the spirit-favor and spirit money distributing custom is a symbolic acknowledgement of Dao Mâu women’s desire of being free from everyday life problems—financial and obligatory responses to family and society. Many of the women of Dao Mâu feel that escape is possible through the lễ dồng ritual ceremony and so they pursue every opportunity to participate.

As with any human endeavor there is always criticism and displays of jealousy even among the Dao Mậu mediums. Some are criticized for being too passionate and emotional and effusive. Some are criticized for being too generous in the money spent on spirit offerings, spirit-favors and spirit money. There is always a need to maintain balance in carrying out the ritual observance. Dao Mậu mediums however often pursue this calling without regards to limiting their generosity. The idea of course is that the more
one spends, the more one gets in terms of the respect and adoration of followers and the more the merit bestowed by the spirits.

Medium Tam, a successful shop keeper in the old quarter of Hanoi who has been a Đạo Mẫu medium for 40 years said:

I save money to go back to my hometown in Ha Nam (about 60 km from Hanoi) to host my lèn dòng ritual annually. I buy offerings in Hanoi but buy food and prepare the meal for all ritual participants at my hometown. It is more reasonable to prepare food there so that I can invite my relatives and friends in the village. Everyone gets an equal amount of spirit-favors and spirit money. I know approximately how much money I have for the ritual. When I am serving the spirit, I distribute as much as I can and I don’t think of money. My only thought is sharing and being happy by sharing. Giving spirit-favors to people in my hometown who are poor and grateful is a good thing to do. It doesn’t mean doing good things is to “buy” good fortune. However, because the spirit is fair and thoughtful (ông Thánh có tốt), it is believed that if we do good things for other people, good things will come to our family. That is why I often have luck coming suddenly after each time serving the spirit and I often feel like I am doing this not only for them but also for supporting my family and business.

By distributing the spirit-favors and spirit money, the giver believes that she is doing the right thing for the spirit. Thus, she is accruing credit for good fortune for her family and herself. The participants believe that they are getting good fortune no matter how much the value of the spirit-favor and spirit money they get. At the same time, these worshippers also make real money offerings to the spirit incarnating in body of the host medium. Engaging the medium’s attitude and behavior, many ritual worshippers are also super-passionate, and super-generous.

Instead of waiting for the spirit to hand them spirit money, they prepare their real money offering in a plate and offer this to the spirit with some special requests. The host medium receives these money plates one by one and asks the Mother Goddess to bless the money before giving part of this special offering back (lai lại) to the worshipper. She
would keep some of the offering to distribute to the ritual assistants and the liturgical musicians and singers. She may then give back to the giver some of the money given in the offering, now-blessed smaller bills.

Thus, for example, if the worshipper gives five 50,000 VND to the spirit, the host medium may distribute back about twenty 10,000 VND bills or ten 20,000 VND bills to the worshipper. The giver of the real money offering becomes the receiver of spirit money distribution. They get back a lesser amount compared to what they offered but it is very a happy exchange since for the worshipper the spirit money is always much more valuable than the real money. Its value is very different from values in real life as it is blessed money. The medium keeps a portion of the offering and may return the rest with some other spirit-favors such as a pack of cigarettes or a glass of wine (see figure 29).

Figure 29: Real Money Offerings

Hoa, a daughter of a 75 year old medium said:

My nine siblings and I have been participating in my mother’s lênn ngőng rituals for more than 20 years. We often offer the real money plate to my mother for good luck. It is also to support her because she can have more money to distribute as the spirit money. Each time I make a real money plate to her, I tell her “My Lord (or My Lady), please keep my offerings and dispense (ban) good luck to us.” The spirit incarnates in my mother then gives part of my money to her assistants, the musician, singers and only a small bill to me. I keep these bills on my family private altar at
home and spend them to buy incense sticks and paper money at the end of each year to make offerings to our ancestors and spirits. If someone else offers a real money offering, my mother will give more money back to them than to me. She said she accepted our support because we are her children but she doesn’t want to spend other people’s money for her ritual. Usually, during the Seventh and Tenth Princes’ incarnations, many worshippers offer the real money plate. They believe these spirits provide good luck for business and gambling. Some participants ask for a sacred number to gamble on. The number they select to gamble is the last 2 or 4 numbers of the serial number on money bills given back to them from the spirit. Sometimes people win big money in gambling or in the lottery by picking these numbers.

This spirit-favor and spirit money distributing custom gives women the opportunity to act and practice their desire for fairness and the notion of reciprocity in social and family relationships. By acting within the constraints of tradition the women get a chance to exercise their abilities and make considered judgment and seek pleasure by indulging in festive ceremonies. In this way, the women of Đạo Mẫu begin to develop ethical values and social skills which can facilitate the transfer to the everyday life of these women, and become guides for personal action and decision making. An action repeated many times thus begins to become part of an individual’s persona over time and a source of personal values and coping skills. What they learn and practice within the temple, then becomes a natural guide for behaving outside of the temple.

Medium Tam explained:

I try to distribute spirit-favors equally. Every participant gets the same box of candies or piece of food. However, when I distribute spirit money I can select who I want to give it to and how much I can give them. I often put my spirit money in different small red envelopes so that I know which envelop is given to whom but the receiver may not know the difference.
5.3. **Lên dòng rituals in the life of bàn hội**

5.3.1. **Organization of Bàn hội**

Dao Mậu women have a tendency to organize themselves in small groups called bàn hội or cơ cánh [literally means faction] within a temple. Because Dao Mậu women view themselves as part of a group, this group contributes substantively to the creation of the persona of each member and it is essential to look at how this organization manifests itself. In the Dao Mậu context, a bàn hội comprises of a group of people who come from the same temple. The term đền [literally means a temple or shrine] in this context is called chốn tổ [literally means an ancestral place]. My informants described chốn tổ as not only a ‘home of spirits’ or ‘sacred place to worship spirits’ but also as a spiritual home for Dao Mậu worshippers. They said their chốn tổ was where they were reborn as the spirit’s offspring [because it was the place that one hosted her Initiation Ritual and performed her annual rituals] and where people are transformed and become extraordinary.
The bàn hội, a Đạo Mẫu community of women created by bonds of sisterhood among people who worship at a shared temple and consider themselves the followers of the temple leader. By being a follower at a particular temple the women thus achieve a special identity. The bàn hội varies in the number of women it encompasses. A big temple may have a big group of hundreds of members. Membership in a bàn hội is not limited to women. It is open to men. The basis for membership in one faction or another can be either the relationship with the temple leader, or friendship with other members.

A bàn hội is an informal organization. My informants who belong to different bàn hội were quick to point out that membership in a bàn hội did not require an entrance or annual fee. There is no specific membership term. Anyone can join a faction when she is a Đạo Mẫu worshipper. She can quit her membership without a formal notice. In addition, membership in a bàn hội is not restricted to people from the same background, age or economic class. Informants described people from different areas, occupations, young and old, rich and poor—grouping together at the temple or in the pilgrimages during gathering of their bàn hội based on a common belief in the Đạo Mẫu.

Members of each bàn hội gather occasionally upon the calling of their master medium for a special lên đồng ritual or pilgrimage. This gathering is also not required but optional to members. For certain gatherings, participants are required to contribute money for the cost of food, transportation, and offerings.

Every master medium or temple leader is often expected to host at least four major lên đồng rituals a year.33 During these lên đồng rituals, members of each bàn hội are invited by the temple leader. All worshippers come together for a meal and get spirit-

33 For a description of these rituals, see Chapter 3.
favors and spirit money prepared by the temple leader. Participants can give gifts to the
temple leader including offerings or money but this is not required.

At the beginning of each lunar calendar year, bàn hôi often goes on long
pilgrimages or field trips together. These pilgrimages have several beneficial effects: they
provide an opportunity for the members to bond and develop a group identity, and they
provide an opportunity to travel to some other place and enjoy the festivities. It also
creates an opportunity for a select number of members to demonstrate organizing skills,
and skills required to make the trip a success. These organizers also gain the admiration
of their fellow members, or disappointment if the trip is not successful.

Typically, at the temple, there is an announcement about the pilgrimage including
the time schedule, the places it will go to, the registration fee and the deadline. Some
members will take care of logistic issues on behalf of the temple leader. Every member
can register for her family and friends if the pilgrimage has no seat limit. These family
members and friends are not necessarily Đạo Mẫu worshippers but they like to join the
pilgrimage for good luck and fun.  

A bàn hôi does not have an economic or legal function. Activities of a bàn hôi are
typically described as primarily social. Informants recounted how they gathered in rituals
to talk, tell life stories, gossip, play cards and chess, and learn about Đạo Mẫu spirits or
Châu văn music and songs. The exchange of life stories in the bàn hôi played an
important role in the socialization of Đạo Mẫu women. It is not simply for entertainment
but also serves an important vehicle for communication among worshippers, most of
whom are women.

34 For a description of Đạo Mẫu pilgrimages, see Chapter 6.
For many Đạo Mẫu women, this socialization takes the informal form of explicit instruction in life skills such as doing business, handling family conflicts and so on. Many informants said they felt like going to the temple had the effect of ridding them from the pressures of daily. At the temple they felt unburdened and peaceful in heart and mind because of having others to share life problems with. Other informants emphasized the opportunities and benefits of making new friends at these gatherings, hearing other’s life stories and success in business and triumphs in dealing with their own life situations, thus giving many of the women of Đạo Mẫu the courage and confidence to tackle their own problems.

Hoa, a stay-home wife, said:

Moments facing multiple sorrows and depressions I have a need for a place to be unburdened. Thus, I go to the temple and pray for keeping a peaceful mind. I am more comfortable talking to the spirit and sharing with my friends over there.

Usually, within a bàn hội there are smaller groups of women who share commonalities, such as living in the same neighborhood, working together or being high school classmates. These smaller groups get together more often and become closer compared to other members of a bàn hội. They become a mutual aid society or club, helping take care of each other’s kids, even going to visit each other at home when someone gets sick or during special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and births. Women from this smaller group consider themselves as “sisters” (chị em). They sometimes help each other find jobs, a life partner or even loan each other money.

This network of sisterhoods serve an important function in the life of the women of Đạo Mẫu touching the lives of all of these women by allowing them to be beneficiaries of help, and givers of support, depending on the needs of the situation. In essence the
sisterhoods encourage and generate the confidence which in turns promotes the development of “soft power”---the means to overcome hardships and triumph over life’s many challenges.

Master medium Minh said:

We get together comfortably and freely. Sometimes, we can chat and share meals, and participate in ceremonies ourselves. During the anniversary month (tháng tiệc) we often get together for pilgrimages. It is to serve the spirit. However it gives us a chance for going out and sight seeing. I feel like we are escaping our everyday duties. A pilgrimage or field trip lasts from one day to a one week long depending on the place we go and how we can arrange things together. For me no matter how long is it, I can enjoy some recreation, and have fun with my friends.

Medium Kha has a successful husband and three mature children but suffers loneliness because of a lack of respect and sharing from her family. She told me of how the temple helped her serve her social and personal needs:

It is not easy to talk about this to my colleagues. I don’t want to lose face or be pitied by co-workers or relatives. I became a Đạo Mẫu medium about 20 years ago. At the temple, I make friends with other mediums. My master medium is like my soul mate who could listen to all happiness and sorrow in my life and support me. I am quite comfortable to tell her everything. Besides her, I find some friends who are truly close because they share the same life burdens as I. During my ritual, they pray to the spirits and ask their help for me.

She emphasized:

Even when you get married and have children, you may face more unfairness and unhappiness. Who can you talk with? Who can you feel open with and trust? Thus participating in Đạo Mẫu is a direction toward the cultivation of virtue or practicing charity (tu tâm) with the hope of being unburdened in reality.

The network created at a temple or through lên đồng ritual is very important when people fall into difficult situations which appear to have no easy way to get resolved. Although spirits are very strict and demanding in many situations, you can always go and have a spiritual chat, unburden yourself when it is necessary, and secure spiritual
guidance and perspective when that seems appropriate. People believed that the spirits are always there---on a 24/7 basis, better in this sense than a human companion, or a professional adviser. Thieves, criminals, and prostitutes can go to the temple and pray like everyone else and are free to become members of a bàn hỏi.

Medium Chi talked about a difficult situation she was in. Her unmarried friend was pregnant and decided to have an abortion and asked her for help. They both felt guilty about their decision. Later she found out her friend was a part-time prostitute. She was very upset. She took her friend to meet with master medium Ba because she could not think of who to talk with. Master medium Ba had a lèn dòng ritual to ask the spirit’s opinion on the abortion issue for Chi’s friend. Having support from these people who rallied around her provided a much needed support network for the prostitute to deal with her situation. It is also a good example of how the bàn hỏi works within Đạo Mẫu.

Most of my informants preferred to share more with their peers and the leader of their temple (or the religious leader) within their bàn hỏi than with family members. When I asked why they needed the bàn hỏi besides the women’s union, the worker’s union and other social networks, some of them said they did not have close access to other social networks. They said they were too busy with family obligations or business burdens to seek help. They made time to go to the temple to get support from the spirits. It was socially acceptable and if the spirits did not provide support, friends at the temple would. Some said there was much more trust among bàn hỏi members because they share the same belief and commitment to the spirits. Most of them said they felt more comfortable and helpful to share with the leader of the temple because she had spirit power to give them advice and support.
During my interview with master medium Vy, there were six phone calls within an hour from her temple members, all about urgent problems. One call was about seeking advice on a relocation of a business, another about money issues, another about losing money at home, another about a new house ritual; another about a squabble between a husband and wife; still another about a husband having a girlfriend and the sixth about finding a good day to have a wedding ceremony. Master medium Vy listened to them carefully. She did not offer a solution to all of these issues. For some she left the answer as advice and support without a clear solution. However, all of the congregants seemed to be satisfied with the advice and actions taken. Observing this made me realize what an important role these mediums play in their community.

Master medium Vy spent more time talking to me because of those interruptions. When replying to my question about why she could give advice through the phone at her adherent’s convenience without requesting them to come to the temple, she said:

I consider my role as both a religious leader and a more experienced woman talking to my adherents. Since I have spiritual ability, it gives me more confidence in understanding their problems and helping them find a solution in coping with these problems. They trust me and follow my advice because of many reasons. First, I am very direct and honest to them about what I can see. I don’t hide information that they might not want to hear. For example, a lady went to ask me about supporting her husband’s business. I told her if she didn’t have an affair with his assistant, his business would be better. She was angry at me but she could not reject it. She asked for my solution although reminding me it would be better for her if I didn’t mention the affair at the temple like that. I have learned that many people want to find solutions without acknowledging the facts. I first advise them to observe the moral rules in the real world before asking for help from the spirits. I analyze with them their situation to help them see through their own problems rationally. I think it is important for my adherents to understand the law of the relationship between cause and effect so that they can avoid doing bad things and suffering misfortune by their own thought and behavior. Then, I ask for spirit help by reporting to
the spirits their problem, and insisting on the spirits’ protection and support. If necessary we will go on with specific rituals to reduce or avoid misfortune.”

The bonding of Đạo Mẫu women in their bàn hội also strengthens their limited resources of happiness, joy and sources of social activities and recognition. There is a popular saying known to Đạo Mẫu mediums that “Only when you lose everything, do you find your red veil” (hết sạch sành sanh mới được manh áo dở). The “red veil” symbolizes the faith and the connection of the medium with the spirit which can protect the medium from misfortune. Many times, Đạo Mẫu women within a bàn hội use this “red veil” symbol of becoming a Đạo Mẫu medium to be able to advise their peers with their life crisis. Thus, bàn hội as a social network among Đạo Mẫu women can also be a “school” for women to enable them to learn about Đạo Mẫu and the intricacies of the ritual ceremonies and become mediums.

5.3.2. Lên dòng rituals and Communitas in the life of Bản hội

Bản hội is the embodiment and product of the need for a social network of Đạo Mẫu women. Their close bond is cemented formally through the lên dòng ritual practice. Their preparation, elaboration and participation in the ritual procedures enable them to experience socialization in a communitas which is ”a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions” (Turner 1967:100).

In the lên dòng ritual context, a communitas is created among Đạo Mẫu worshippers around the central host medium. The host medium facilitates the group’s progress to transform everyone by her own self-transformation. Before looking at how this transformation works in creating the communitas during the actual ritual, it is
important to understand the symbolic meaning of the Mother Goddess image in Đạo Mẫu.

Đạo Mẫu mediums use the word dồng [literally means “child”] to refer to a medium as an “offspring of the Mother Goddess” (con cháu nhà Mẫu). The lên đồng ritual maintains the shared symbolic meaning of the Mother Goddess image. In the Đạo Mẫu pantheon of spirits, the Mother Goddess is the Supreme Deity. She is the symbolic Mother of the created world and humans. As Đặng Văn Lung (2004) points out, the Mother Goddess is symbolically the Mother Nature (Tình Mẹ) and Mother Principle (Nguyên lý Mẫu).

Spirits in the Đạo Mẫu pantheon are not viewed as being the offspring of the Mother Goddess but they all think and act in accord with the principles and values associated with the Mother Nature and the Mother Principle (Đặng Văn Lung 2004:495). All Đạo Mẫu worshippers are viewed as being the offspring of the Mother Goddess and follow the Mother Nature and the Mother Principle. Both groups, the spirits and human beings, come from different roots but share the same principles and values.

In Đạo Mẫu, the Mother Goddess is honored for her own virtues and qualities---as being a woman. They are honored as independent beings with their own divine styles of experiencing life. The Mother Goddesses provide imagery of depth and mythic impact, which is not available to women in most religious traditions which are male dominated.

The Mother Nature is imbued with the capacity of creating, nurturing, enduring, and initiating in life. The relationship between Đạo Mẫu spirits and worshippers is like the mother-child relationship. Thus, worshippers taking part in the lên đồng ritual share
the purity and gentleness of children relating to their mother. This is the source of the bonding which the worshipper feels with the Đạo Mẫu.

The Mother Principle is embodied in three areas including: Mother Authority (quyền Mẫu), Mother Empowerment (phép Mẫu) and Mother Resource (lộc Mẫu). Đặng Văn Lung calls the Mother Principle a Yin Nature (tính âm). All Đạo Mẫu spirits act in accord with the principles and values of the Mother Principle regardless of whether they are incarnation of male or female spirits, high officials or ordinary spirits. Thus, Đạo Mẫu spirits are viewed as treating their worshippers as the Mother acting with her children.

In responding to my question about the meaning of the word òng in Vietnamese my informants shared some common understanding: it could mean “together” (cùng), or “sharing the same thought and action” (hòa òng) or “a child” (trẻ con) or a “child-like status” (trạng thái trẻ thơ). Since the lên òng ritual is a ritual gathering. It is a word that is often used in describing the connection between people—humans, and the spirits. With the multiple meanings the word is a good description of the complexities of this connection. And, it is a connection strengthened through the performance of the ritual ceremonies. The image of òng---of a woman connecting people together to share thoughts and actions is very central value of the Mother Nature in Vietnamese culture.

The role of a human mother playing the same role as the Mother Goddess in real life---creating harmony and promoting good relationship is symbolized in the lên òng ritual.

A human mother is the one person who listens to you, cares for you, is proud of you, and supports you through all of your successes and failures, happiness and anxieties. The human mother’s role is much more effective and powerful when the ritual places the
divine spirit with the worshipper as this bestows spiritual power into the woman, making her like a Mother Goddess or other Đạo Mẫu spirits. This bonding thus becomes the source of a core value and a source of power for Đạo Mẫu women.

This power obviously presents a basis for a soft power strategy created and experienced first and primary by women. However, in reality, many informants were consciously aware that, not all women/human mothers behave with a Yin Nature or the Mother Nature. On the other hand, some men/fathers may adopt this quality to cope with their life difficulties and behave with other people very well. This fact again explains that soft power is not owned or belongs only to women although women may know and practice it better.

As the lên động ritual is being performed and the spirit possession takes place personal feelings or identity are transformed into a collective response or reality. This experience reinforces the Đạo Mẫu women’s belief in and desire for shared meanings, shared values, shared emotions and sensibilities. The ritual experience thus recognizes the worshipper’s desires by creating a collective or social identity---an identity created by a sense of community, to replace the individual persona. Turner describes this transformation as being a reflection of the idea of “communitas.” It describes the feeling of comradeship among the “liminal personae” during the intermediate period of liminality in ritual in which the characteristics of the social structure are no longer and not yet applicable (1969a:94-97, 125-130).

Applying Turner’s conceptualizing of communitas in rituals as liminality, marginality, inferiority, and equality (1969a, 1974a), at the separation phases of the lên động ritual process, Đạo Mẫu women, the ritual subjects are "neither here nor there."
They are subjected to the rest of the community and treated as equals to one another, creating a generic bond and a sentiment of human kindness among themselves.

The ritual participants transport themselves from the world of the secular to enter the world of the spirits. Engaging in a new order of an imaginary world, the Đạo Mẫu woman is viewed as detaching herself from her ordinary status to experience a new being, a new persona within herself. The transition of sensibilities and values from one framework of being to another leaves her vulnerable, suspended between two identities and two life worlds. At this dangerous time, she needs support from the group of worshippers and the use of ritual to facilitate the transition. All worshippers at this “liminal” moment have a need to come together as equal beings despite any distinguishing characteristic of social structure to overcome the transition or the “threshold status.” For Đạo Mẫu worshippers, this status is the reality to be experienced in between the real world and the spiritual/transcendental world or between the earth and heaven.

The statement “sharing feelings” (đồng cảm) deserves special mention in connection with the lên dòng ritual. When pressed for an explanation why you invite many Đạo Mẫu mediums within your bàn hỏi, your family members and friends to participate in your lên dòng ritual performance, many informants replied with a common theme that “They provide support with sharing feelings by grouping together.” Some informants said, they preferred more Đạo Mẫu mediums to participate in their ritual because the mediums understood the ritual meaning and were better at sharing feelings and thoughts. Others said they only invited some family member who could understand
and share their feelings and thoughts; they didn’t invite the one that could use profanities towards spirits.

The Đạo Mẫu women utilize the ritual to create their communitas. Turner (1969a:131-140) describes three types of communitas in society including “spontaneous communitas”, “normative communitas”, and “ideological communitas.” The communitas one created during lên đồng rituals is the “spontaneous communitas.” This type of communitas describes a status that the ritual participant is free from all structural demands and is fully spontaneous and immediate. In the ritual context, there is no rich and poor, no higher and lower social or economic statuses; everyone is children of the Mother Goddess; everyone desires support from the spirit and everyone shares, understands and encourages. However, as Turner suggests, the communitas is not a permanent condition. So, an issue which arises is how long this communitas can last.

After the intermediate liminal phase, the ritual process comes to an end (the reunion). How can this typical network or its image be maintained? Lên đồng rituals promote and perpetuate the symbolic meaning of the Mother Goddess that Đạo Mẫu women are aware of. This meaning enables them to return for support and comfort long after the ritual has ended. Thus, even when the reunion phase ends, and the ritual process completes, everyone returns to their ordinary everyday lives, their sense of collectiveness continues to strengthen their close bond among ritual participants, especially among members of a bàn hội.

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35 Deflem (1991:11) summarizes Turner ideas of three types of communitas in detail: (1) “existential or spontaneous communitas”, which is free from all structural demands and is fully spontaneous and immediate; (2) “normative communitas,” or “existential communitas,” which is organized into a social system; and (3) “ideological communitas”, which refers to utopian models of societies based on “existential communitas” and is also situated within the structural realm. The types of “communitas” are phases, not permanent conditions.
The act of distributing spirit-favors and spirit money at the end of the lề̤n dòng ritual not only brings everyone back to the real world but it also brings the spirits’ equal support or the spiritual power back home with them. This makes the ritual a renewal process whenever a person feels a need for rejuvenation and revitalization. There may be very different feelings they can take away with them after the ritual, such as regretful feelings of going back to an ordinary life; or good feelings of going back to feel life more meaningful, especially good feelings that they can go back to the ritual process again.

5.4. Conclusion

Some scholars view ritual as being "stereotyped communication ... which reduces anxiety, prepares the organism to act, and coordinates the preparation for action among several organisms” (Wallace 1996:236). Đạo Mẫu ritual plays this same role in helping worshippers cope with problems in different stages of life --- growing up, marriage, childbearing, childrearing, aging, sickness, death as well as dealing with career and work issues. This chapter has looked at how lề̤n dòng ritual empowered Đạo Mẫu women by enabling them to fulfill their desires in personal life and the life of their Đạo Mẫu community. However, not only ritual process is able to identify the obligation of these women or manifest the empowerment and communitas in the life of Đạo Mẫu women. In the next chapter, I will look at another domain of Đạo Mẫu, space-time spheres presented in Đạo Mẫu temples and pilgrimage to see how these spheres contribute to the way in which Đạo Mẫu women live their lives in reality.
CHAPTER 6.
ĐẠO MẦU TEMPLE AND PILGRIMAGE: THE SPACETIME IN THE LIVES OF ĐẠO MẦU WOMEN

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter showed how the lên dòng ritual enables Đạo Mẫu women to experience personal self actualization and self expression within the social and cultural expectations of their times. The ritual and the sense of place created by the temple, and the dynamics of going on a pilgrimage create the means for this transformation to take place. In this chapter, I describe the varieties of Đạo Mẫu temples, the routes of some of the pilgrimages and the activities undertaken by the worshippers. It aims to examine the way in which the Đạo Mẫu temple and pilgrimage are organized and developed as one province of Đạo Mẫu women’s lifeworld and how both contribute to the empowerment of these women.

The temple is a material development of the communal group. I am going to apply Coleman and Elsner’s analysis of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, which serves as a “focal point of identity” for the worshippers (1995:164) to study the Đạo Mẫu temple. A Đạo Mẫu temple, đền, is a place to worship not only the Mother Goddess but many other spirits. While honoring polytheism, a Đạo Mẫu temple is a representation of the Mother Principle (nguyên lý Mẫu). In Đạo Mẫu, the Mother Goddess is viewed as the creative spirit of the cosmos and humans. The spirit is both the creator of life and the sustainer of life. Thus, the Đạo Mẫu temple is a place where the role of the Mother Goddess’s is recognized and celebrated. This chapter examines the ways in which the

36 The term đền literally means temple (Bùi Phượng’s dictionary ([1977] 2003). However, in the Đạo Mẫu context, my informants often refer đền as ‘a home of the spirits’ or ‘a sacred place to worship spirits’.
37 See more on the Mother Principle in Chapters 1 and 4.
temples create this sacred setting and see how it articulates with the life world of the women of Đạo Mẫu.

While the temple is a physical place, an immobile space-time sphere, the pilgrimage is an activity which reflects and embodies many different motivations and purposes. The Vietnamese term for the pilgrimage, dĩ lễ, simply means ‘to go to perform rituals.’ However, many informants described their purpose to participate in the pilgrimage with explanations such as the following: “to visit spirits at their home and show respect to them”, “to thank the spirits for their support,” “to remember the spirits,” and to “gain more support from the spirits.” The pilgrimage is a “kinetic ritual” (Turner, 1978:13) and consists of “moving images” (Coleman and Eade 2004:1). Citing Turners’ analysis of pilgrimage, Coleman and Eade point out that “journeying is said to bring the possibility of creating social and/or psychological transformation” (2004:1). In this chapter, I want to show how going on these pilgrimages seems to benefit and empower the worshipper. Turner’s conception of pilgrimage as extraordinary practices and a creative and transformative process provides a conceptual framework for my analysis.

6.2. The Đạo Mẫu temple

6.2.1. The Đạo Mẫu temple and the structure of the Vietnamese living world

The relationship of the spirit world and the living world of Đạo Mẫu believers and life practices refers to the dialectical connection between religion and society---the notion that “God is society” (Durkheim 1915). The structure of the Đạo Mẫu temple thus is thought to reflect the ethic of the spirit world and the living world.

For the Vietnamese, family is a focal point. The interior of a Đạo Mẫu temple is structured similarly to a Vietnamese traditional household, typically that of a royal
family. The arrangement of the icons on the altar thus reflects this family orientation.

The spirit pantheon is ranked by kinship terms and royal terms: Father-Mother, Emperor-Mother Goddess, Kings and Mandarins, Princes and Princess. Altars are designed like palaces of the Nguyễn dynasty\(^{38}\) with three palaces (tam cung) or six institutes (lục viễn). Every spirit is dressed in royal uniforms (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2002: 64). In the spirit pantheon of the Đạo Mẫu, the Mother Goddess is the supreme deity. This is similar to the underlying principle of a Vietnamese traditional family where the mother is the focal point and authority figure even while allowing the father to speak for her and appearing as the decision maker. In addition, as in a Vietnamese family house, the women’s room is often placed in more private space, the Mother Goddess altar is placed in the most sacred space of a Đạo Mẫu temple. It is called the sanctuary in the back (hậu cung). This altar is behind all other spirit altars. Đạo Mẫu worshippers have to go through all other altars to reach this sanctuary. If the temple is small and narrow, the Mother Goddess altar is placed on the highest part of the altar.

The Mother Goddess’s authority and status is acknowledged also in the physical structure of a Đạo Mẫu temple. This structure is symbolic of a Vietnamese notion of the cosmos which includes Three Palaces (Tam phủ): the palace of Heaven (thiên phủ), the palace of Upland Forests (nhạc phủ) and the palace of Water (thủy (thoại) phủ). There are different Mother Goddesses governing each palace. The First Mother Goddess of Heaven (Mẫu đề nhất Thương Thiên) is placed in the center and at the highest position of the altar. Lower on the First Mother Goddess’ left is the Second Mother Goddess of Upland

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\(^{38}\) The last dynasty in Vietnam (1802-1945).
Forests (Mẫu dê nhì Thường Ngàn). Lower on the right is the Third Mother Goddess of Water (Mẫu dê tam Thoại Phù).

The Vietnamese notion of cosmos also includes Four Palaces (Tứ phủ): the palace of Heaven (thiên phủ), the palace of Earth (địa phủ), the palace of Upland Forests (nhắc phủ) and the palace of Water (thuỷ (thoại) phủ). Three other Mother Goddesses plus the Mother Goddess of Earth (Mẫu Địa) all are placed on the same line of the altar. The conception of cosmos in Đạo Mẫu is influenced by the philosophy of yin-yang which is the basis of the duality of the Đạo Mẫu deity system: female and male spirits, the father line and the mother line, heaven and earth, forests (mountains) and water. In this cosmos, the Mother Goddess represents the feminine yin element and is the highest creator of nurturing and fertility. This is the cosmos ruled by the Mother Principle (nguyên lý Mẫu) (Đặng Văn Lung 2004: 588-595, Ngô Đức Thịnh 2002: 62-63).

The Đạo Mẫu altar on the other hand, remains open and flexible in its design. There is no one strict way for designing a Đạo Mẫu temple. The design varies by locale and the wishes of the master mediums. For example, in some Đạo Mẫu private temples, there is one Mother Goddess at the highest part of the main altar because this Mother Goddess is the tutelary spirit of the temple leader while for other private temples there may be other spirits on the center of the main altar depending on what the tutelary spirit of the temple leader is (See appendises 1 and 2).

The arrangement of Đạo Mẫu altars is often very crowded. The altar resembles a joint committee with so many different spirits in colorful dresses sitting closely to each other. The arrangement and decorations of Đạo Mẫu altars reflects the communal orientation of Vietnamese spirits. It is very much like the family altar found in many
Vietnamese households. There are pictures and separate incense bowls used for honoring different groups placed in the very limited altar space. This suggests that despite the outside form of the hierarchy in the pantheon, Đạo Mẫu spirits are treated equally under the governing of the Mother Goddess (see figure 31).

The polytheistic feature of Vietnamese belief system is also a product of Vietnamese’s communal living style. Thus, the organization of the icons representing the spirits on the Đạo Mẫu altar reflects the same communal living style of the Vietnamese (Nguyễn Tử Chi 1996: 131-140, Trần Ngọc Thêm 2004: 254). The spirits conduct their work as a joint committee and the placement of the icons reflect the mystification that the spirits are assembled for local folks to exercise some control over their spiritual powers, such as some social control over their own communities.

Informants often described the Đạo Mẫu temple as being a place which provided them a spiritually open, crowded, casual and warm atmosphere. They felt comfortable and confident participating in this environment as if it was a home away from home.
At the temple, one informant said, women could enjoy the temple’s scene in the company with other women and this was something important for them. Most Đạo Mẫu temples are designed with a complex of altars and nature scenes, such as mountains, trees, rivers and gardens, surrounding the temple. After making an offering and waiting
for incense sticks to burn completely, the worshippers can walk around, enjoying the beautiful scene and a chat with their peers. Thus, the temple is not only a sacred place to commune with the spirits but also a social space where individuals can spend time to relax and build group bonds or the communitas (Turner 1974).

In communing with the spirits in this environment, women have many opportunities to share their feelings, information and gossip with a network of peers who share religious thoughts and feelings. This is much like the women’s community in Taiwan (Margery Wolf 1972) in which sharing gossip is viewed as a means of social control over a family relationship such as a wayward husband. The space-time spent thus enables Đạo Mẫu women to feel different about themselves and their lives.

Medium Kha described her feelings when she was at the temple:

My friends and I often go to the temple together. We try to go regularly. We feel peaceful and calm (thanh thản) and full of energy after leaving the temple. It is like recharging your life battery. A battery needs to be recharged regularly.

6.2.2. Đạo Mẫu temples and the relationship with Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism

The structure of a temple is a map showing how the diverse beliefs of the Vietnamese---Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism---can be integrated within a temple devoted to the worship of the Mother Goddess (see figure 32).

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39 For addition information on the communitas of the community of Đạo Mẫu women community, see Chapter 5.
In figure 32, there are different groups of deities representing three religions. The Compassionate Buddha, Guanyin is placed in the highest position. The second group of deities is placed on the second highest position of the picture including Daoist deities and their assistants. The rest of the deities are the Mother Goddesses, the highest deity of Đạo.
Mẫu religion and her assistants. This arrangement shows the “incorporating nature”\(^{40}\) (tính dung hợp) of Đạo Mẫu. This means the Vietnamese accept every religious belief whether it is native or from outside as long as it supports their moral values and promotes suitable behaviors in the family and society. They tend to take outside belief systems and localize these beliefs and integrate the new ideas with their own beliefs to better serve their need of surviving (Trần Ngọc Thêm 2001: 553, Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004: 24).

As a native belief system, the cult of the Mother Goddesses has accepted the ideas and customs of different complex religious ideologies to become a national religion. It is an inclusive religion, not an exclusive one. Thus, the Đạo Mẫu temple is invaluable as a showplace of its inclusively and enables a visitor “to appreciate the messiness, openness, and geographical and ontological fluidity that is the very stuff of an adaptable, dynamic, and vital popular religion” (Kendall 2006: 168).

Informants don’t separate the Buddha or Guanyin from the spirits. Informants in their stories often spell out the combination term of Buddha-Spirit (Phật Thánh). The order of this pronoun-combination, however, reflects the rank of deities in which the Buddha is higher than the spirits. Đạo Mẫu worshippers often say that “the Buddha is compassionate while spirits are very insistent” (phật tế bỉ hỷ sà, thánh mồ tả lai cùng chấp).

The close connection between Buddhism and Đạo Mẫu is also reflected in the praying order. Đạo Mẫu women always pray to the Buddha first and then call the other spirits. Potvin and Stedman point out some other aspects of the Buddha and spirits in relation with prayers:

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\(^{40}\) The term “tính dung hợp” is also translated “synthesizing nature” in Trần Ngọc Thêm’s work.
In the Vietnamese spiritual world, many deities are actually real human beings that have lived exceptional lives and have kept their influential position in the afterlife. Buddha is the highest ranking of all. Other deities of human origin include famous and powerful emperors, mandarins and national heroes that influenced Vietnamese history. Buddha the compassionate has to take care of everybody, irrespective of his or her deeds and situation. He is therefore extremely busy and does not have time to cater to each individual prayer. However, other figures are choosier; they will look upon individual prayers and decide which one they will answer favorably (2008:40).

Many informants view the Buddha as a little distant and too abstract to meet the needs of living people in the real or physical world. They believe they need the support of the Buddha when they die and go to the afterlife. While living, they feel they need support from the spirits of Đạo Mẫu because the spirits can reward and punish like humans. Both medium Di and medium Tu agreed about this inclusive characteristic.

We need both the Buddha and the spirits. The Buddha is the highest of all. The Buddha supports our afterlife to go beyond usual practices (siêu thoát) and to keep peaceful and calm (thanh thản). Spirits provide everyday life support such as healing for good health, wealth, good fortunes and so on. Only spirits provide spirit-favors because they used to being humans, the Buddha doesn’t.

The mixture of Đạo Mẫu and Buddhism and Daoism is symbolized in the myth of the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh. Liễu Hạnh appeared in the Đạo Mẫu spirit system relatively late, in the 16th century during the Late Lê dynasty (1428 - 1788). She has been a central figure of Đạo Mẫu as the supreme deity and the only female deity of the four Vietnamese immortals---the most important deities in the Vietnamese belief system. Since she was reincarnated into the living world three times, she appeared on the Đạo Mẫu altar as three incarnations of the Mother Goddess that is, the three Mother Goddesses over the three Palaces (Tam Phú) (see figure 33). She took on different titles including the Mother Goddess of Heaven (Thánh Mẫu Thường Thiên), the Mother.
Goddess of Upland Forests (Thánh Mẫu Thương Ngàn) and the Mother Goddess of Water (Mẫu Thọài).

Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh had both human and celestial origins. She originated as a princess in Heaven and was exiled to the earth because she broke a jade glass and was punished for this transgression. She was then born in a Lê family, got married, had a son and a daughter and died when she was 21 years old. After returning to her Heaven home, she missed her family and the living world so much so she was reincarnated a second time to be an intellectual. She made friends with other intellectuals, wrote poems and traveled around the country. In a third reincarnation, Liễu Hạnh became a heroine. She was reincarnated as a warrior princess who fought and defeated the enemies of the country. She even fought with the king to remedy injustices suffered by the people. However, in a battle with Tiên Quân Thánh, a representative of Daoism, she almost lost her life. The Bodhisattva Guanyin saved her and Liễu Hạnh then became a follower of the Compassionate Buddha, Quanyin. She then became one of the Buddhist deities as well as an incarnate of the Mother Goddess. Thus, in many Đạo Mẫu temples there are pictures or statues of Guanyin which connect the two with title such as “Guanyin first, Mother Goddess following” (tiền Phật hậu Mẫu) or “Mother Goddess first Guanyin following” (tiền Mẫu hậu Phật).

Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh needed to have three lifetimes to achieve the different accomplishments she wished for. In her first life she fulfilled family obligations as a daughter, a wife and a mother. In her second life, she continued fulfilling her family role by bringing offerings people made for her to her parents and taking care of her husband. However, she also experienced the life of an intellectual who could participate in creative
activities with other peers. In her third life she continued her family role by remarrying the incarnation of her husband. In this life she also became a “warrior princess” fighting the enemies of her country. She also challenged the authority of the king and the Confucian ideology because of injustices suffered by the people. In addition she challenged the religious ideologies of Daoism and Buddhism.

Mother Goddess Лиёу Hạnh’s life experiences did not mean that she fought for women’s rights or gender equity, a modern idea, in Vietnam. However my interpretation based on the meaning ascribed by respondents I interviewed is that her lives did reflect a living philosophy of the Vietnamese that: they looked for solutions to life problems or for a better way to cope with life difficulties by improving relationships with each other. Their solutions sometimes seemed to be unrealistic and irrational. However, it was important to have a desire or goal and a methodology to reach that goal, whether the methodology was romanticized or real. Another important message from her lives is that even spirits need to have different lives to experience and achieve what she wants. Thus, Лиёу Hạnh became an ideal for women encouraging them to do things they can do in this present life.

Mother Goddess Лиёу Hạnh in her many lives comes close to epitomizing womanhood, having gone through all the tribulations that a woman endures in the physical world. She also symbolizes the ideal of persevering and dealing with life’s difficulties to get through them---in much the same way that all of the Vietnamese people are called on to deal with personal problems, and national emergencies. Some of my interviewees share a common idea that Лиёу Hạnh symbolizes the Vietnamese way and has become over time a well loved incarnate of the Mother Goddess---a deity which
women can relate to. She has come to symbolize the women of Vietnam and has become one of the pillars of Vietnamese culture and its belief system.

Figure 33: Three Incarnations of the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh
6.2.3. The Đạo Mẫu temple and the exercising of soft power of Đạo Mẫu women

The relationship between Đạo Mẫu women and the temple can be seen in many aspects of the temple. Some Đạo Mẫu temples are public places, owned by a community or the government, as a designated historical place (see figure 32). Others are private shrines or temples, built and owned by a master medium (see figure 33).

The Đạo Mẫu temple is a map of the Vietnamese social structure and a representation of the social processes which produced the social order. The construction and the layout of a temple is thus a symbolic recreation of the social order---from the perspective of women. Public temples are often considered big and important temples (đền to phú lớn) designated as regionally or national cultural heritage sites. Public temples are often named for a legendary or historical figure who had performed great services for the country. This person was honored to be a Đạo Mẫu spirit in that specific temple. Private shrines/temples are built for a master medium or temple leader on her family land as a part of her house. These private shrines/temples are often given the name of the temple leader. The master medium is thought to need her own shrine or temple to serve the spirits otherwise she will suffer the spirit’s retribution or punishment. The shrine or temple thus becomes not only a place to serve her followers and show her commitment, but also a place which gives her spiritual power to practice as a master medium.

The construction of a Đạo Mẫu temple creates a special place for women, a haven or sanctuary and a space-time for women coming to share and look for a way to cope with life difficulties. Different from other spaces such as a communal houses (đình) or Buddhist pagodas (chùa) which are built, operated and owned by a community, the
private shrine/temple is built for and by the Đạo Mẫu master medium on her family’s private land. Some private shrines/temples are part of the master medium’s homes. In this case, the shrine is located in the highest floor of the house or at one side of the house. Every Đạo Mẫu shrine/temple has a kitchen space close by to prepare offerings or serve communal meals during special religious gatherings at the temple.

**Figure 34:** Public Temples

**Figure 35:** Private Shrines/Temples
The private shrine/temple is built by the temple leader because of her mediumship root obligation. However, locating the temple as a part of the house or next to the house also allows the master medium to stay home and fulfill her family obligations while serving her followers. Having a temple at home also cuts down on travel time.

If the temple leader is popular, her temple can be used by other master mediums during special occasions. Đạo Mẫu worshippers come to her temple for worshiping spirits but also to network with other peers. The temple thus becomes a communal space for the worshippers, providing an alternative to their home as a social space.

Many master mediums with the fortune teller mediumship root build their temples to meet both purposes. The spiritual power of the master medium and fortune teller is not dependent on the size of their shrine or temple. One can be popular among her clients and worshippers with a very small and simple shrine. Sometimes clients and worshippers may help with the cost of expansion or renovation of a private temple.

Master medium Vy is a medium who has fortune telling powers. She said:
When I only had a shrine with a bamboo mat and a barrel as the main altar, spirits provided the same foreseen and foretold ability for me as long as I served them with my sincere heart (thành tâm). The first clients and followers came to me to share their life burdens. They still come to my temple which is very big now. For me the most important thing is a sacred space where spirits can be around me and enable me to see through people’s life events and help them cope with that. My temple is my spirit world. I feel fortunate to be able to have it and love to be there to share with my followers and clients to make their lives better. I feel strong and confident at the temple because I have a connection with the spirit there.

Certain private temples can become public temples as regionally or nationally recognized cultural heritage sites. The temple where I conducted my fieldwork in Hanoi was first built in 1907 by the great grandmother of the current temple leader. Although starting as a privately owed shrine, it is now recognized as a part of Hanoi’s cultural heritage and recently became a public temple (See appendix 1).

The private shrine/temple is constructed according to the kind of mediumship root possessed, finances, family and follower support. There are no prescribed requirements. For example, a master medium with a spiritual connection to the Mother Goddess Upland Forests should build her temple in the middle of an elevated area. If she can not move to that area, she needs to create an appropriate setting through landscaping for her shrine or temple. If the master medium has more support from her family and followers, she may build a big temple with full altar system with luxurious decorations, and spirit statues with elaborate clothing. However, a new master medium with more limited finances can make a very simple shrine.

There are many ways to furnish a temple if cost becomes a consideration. The full altar can be installed without separate areas for placement of the icons representing the different deities. Incense bowls indicating different altars of Đạo Mẫu spirits can be used
to separate the deities. Paintings of the spirits could be used instead of having spirit statutes or pictures.

Each private shrine/temple thus often has its own unique design based on the temple leader’s mediumship root and her creativity. Besides observing certain rules such as grouping the spirit pantheon in different specific altars, the temple/shrine leader can arrange her tutelary spirit in the center of the main altar, often in a higher position in the council of the Four Palaces Altar (Ban thờ Công đồng Tứ phủ) 41. She can imitate some temple model she likes, combine what she has observed and design new images for her shrine/temple.

Although the Đạo Mẫu temple system varies in many aspects including ownership, size, structure, place and design, Đạo Mẫu worshippers can choose any temple which fits them the best in terms of their mediumship root, convenience and other personal preferences or backgrounds. Whether going to a private shrine/temple or a public temple, the spiritual space-time of this sacred spatial organization visualizes the relationship between the living people and spirits in which the worshippers consider themselves as the Mother Goddess’s offspring (con cháu nhà Mẫu). One informant described how the temple engaged her in experiencing the spirits’ existence:

> When I light the incense stick and bow to the spirit at the temple, I feel like I am talking directly with spirits. I just mumble my conversations with the spirits while my friends speak loudly. Everyone is comfortable to make offerings and talk to the spirits over there.

Many informants talked about their feelings while looking at the spirits’ statues at the temple. Master medium Ba said spirit statues were like the living form of the spirit:

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41 The Four Palaces Altar often includes Mandarins and Princes. Sometimes this altar includes the Emperor (Vua cha) and North and South Star spirits (Nam Tào, Bắc Đẩu). The Sơn Trang altar dedicates to upland forests spirits.
Every morning I light incense sticks and candles on spirit altars. I look up at their encouraging faces and get ready for a new day. In life, we want to visit our close people from time to time to show our care, respect and support or to receive the same things. Letters, phone calls, gifts or words through others to communicate are not enough compared to visiting each other in person. Thus, I want to be at the temple to meet and talk to the spirits directly.

Medium Kha, a retired 65 year old teacher described her feelings:

It is not the reverence to the spirits but my true feeling about the spirits. It is like my soul-mate and friend who listens to my happiness and sorrow. I go to the temple and tell them everything. Each spirit statue is different. I pray and share with each spirit my different wishes and feelings. If I talk to the statue of the Mother Goddess, I feel she can see through me and can give me advices and solutions to handle my problems. When I look at the statues of princes and princesses I feel like they are smiling with me and tell me to forget all difficulties and to relax and enjoy life with them.

Informants often said that the iconic statues themselves play such a big role in the communication process. They only felt like meeting with the spirits at the temple because they could see the spirit statues there.

Hoa, a stay-home mother talked about what the temple meant to her:

Although I feel a close and warm atmosphere at the temple, it is different from being at my home, my parents or my friends’ homes as well as at my office. I often feel full support at the temple. I think I also pay full attention in preparing offerings and telling the spirits my problems and my need for help more than in other circumstances. It is more serious to go to the temple. I never go to the temple during my menstruation.

Responding to my question about why women cannot go to the temple during their menstruation, master medium Vy explained that it didn’t mean the women were soiled but just was an excuse for staying at home and resting:

During these days, women are often weaker such as being tired, having backaches, headaches or stomachaches. They are entitled to a rest or reduction of their duties either in their family or at work. They should rest and avoid going to the temple to serve the spirits. Thus, you see, pregnant women are still welcomed every time at the temple. They bring up the fertility for the atmosphere. We honor their appearance at the temple within our group.
6.3. The Đạo Mẫu pilgrimage

6.3.1. Types of Đạo Mẫu pilgrimages

Đạo Mẫu pilgrimages may be trips to visit temples worshiping one spirit in different provinces or pilgrimages to visit different temples which worship different spirits in one province. They may also be pilgrimages organized by one person or pilgrimages organized by groups. The Đạo Mẫu pilgrimage to different temples dedicated to one specific spirit is undertaken to conduct a lễ dỗng ritual to honor this spirit. Đạo Mẫu spirits usually have a human origin and so they have a hometown or places where they once lived, worked and died. Đạo Mẫu worshippers believe that going to visit these places honors the spirit. So they go on these pilgrimages to pay their respects and offer thanks for their guidance, to receive and gifts of advice and good fortune, and to honor them. It is the payment of an obligation for their support. Sometimes, the pilgrimage to temples dedicated to the same spirit is undertaken during the death or birth anniversary months (thằng tiệc) of the spirit\(^{42}\). Worshippers go to the Giây palace in Nam Định, the Sông temple in Thanh Hoa, and the Tây Hồ palace in Hanoi to worship the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh in the lunar third month because this is the time commemorating her death. These three places are historical sites marking her three reincarnations into the living world.

\(^{42}\) For Vietnamese, the anniversary of one’s death is very important. The descendant always get together to make offerings and worship ancestors on the ancestor's death anniversary. At the first anniversary of the death of a person (giỗ đầu) and the second (or the third) anniversary of the death of a person (giỗ hệt) the descendant often invites family relatives and friends to a feast to remember the deceased. Vietnamese even hold national anniversaries. For example, the Dong Da victory anniversary held on the 5th of the lunar first month every year evokes King Quang Trung's resounding victory over the Qing aggressors in 1789. This anniversary highlights not only the Vietnamese people's glorious feats, but also its great benevolence towards the Qing aggressors.
Other pilgrimages are organized to visit temples worshipping different spirits in one area. The route of these pilgrimages may parallel trading routes. These temples are often built along the trading road by vendors and businesswomen who believe that Đạo Mẫu spirits are essential for their business success. Of course the existence of these temples and nearby businesses also generates revenues for these business people. So, by building these temples, the seeds of good fortune are planted by the people themselves.

There are chains of temples between Hanoi, and Lang Son, Nam Dinh and Thanh Hoa. These are popular pilgrimage itineraries. These groups of temples built in certain areas are often dedicated to specific spirits. For example, the middle or highlands in northern Vietnam like Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, Hà Giang, Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng are the area of the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests and her demigods (see maps 2 and 3).
Figure 37: Map 2 - The Pilgrimage Route from Hanoi
Figure 38: Map 3 - The Pilgrimage Route from Thai Nguyen
Another form of pilgrimage is the private pilgrimage. The host medium invites her friends, relatives, and family to join her pilgrimage and participate in her annual *lên dòng* ritual during the pilgrimage. The host medium may hold her *lên dòng* ritual at one temple or different temples during the whole pilgrimage. The host medium pays for most of the costs associated with these pilgrimages. Usually she pays for the rental of a bus, preparing offerings, the fees for singers and musicians, and accommodations for everyone participating in her ritual. This is done to honor the spirits for their support of her and is a means of discharging her obligation to the spirits. But of course this is a mystification of the social reality that is being enacted part of which has something to do with showing off her wealth at least by giving some of it to her followers so they can and will come with her and everyone can be able to experience *Đạo Mẫu* communion.

The guests attending a pilgrimage are expected to make a contribution to help pay for expenses. This gift is made in an envelope to congratulate with money (*mừng dòng*). The gift is often equal to the expense incurred by guests and extra money to help the medium to prepare for her ritual. Most people write their name on their gift envelope so that the medium knows who provided which gift. Careful recordkeeping is important so she can match the gift when she is invited to an occasion by that person. This is a common practice in East Asia, certainly China also.

The public pilgrimages are operated a little differently. The public pilgrimage is often organized by a group of *Đạo Mẫu* worshippers or the master medium at a specific temple or a group of master mediums at different temples. These pilgrimages are more crowded and require much more organizational skills on the past of the organizers. The cost of renting the bus, preparing offerings and other logistics is shared by everyone.
Participation in these pilgrimages is open to everyone not only to the master medium's disciples or Đạo Mẫu worshippers. Everyone including their family, relatives and friends can join the pilgrimages. Usually, the master medium will host her lễ động ritual during the pilgrimage at her expense. However, sometimes, the master medium only conducts the praying ritual or petition submitting ritual on behalf of the whole group at temples during the pilgrimage. The expenses of the pilgrimage are paid by the participants.

The pilgrimage organizers often post the pilgrimage schedule a month in advance. The information is put on a board at the temple. The notice includes the date and itinerary, the fee for going on the pilgrimage and the name of the organizer. Depending on the number of people who sign up, the organizer might recruit assistants to contact the mediums of the temples they plan to visit, and arrange for offerings and make arrangements for the ceremony.

These activities are handled by worshippers and provide these women with a chance to acquire and demonstrate their leadership skills. This is an important secondary benefit to these women---a chance to take on and successfully discharge responsibilities. The pilgrimage thus becomes an empowering opportunity and a chance for the women organizers to gain self confidence and enhance their reputations as leaders within the communitas.

6.3.2. The Đạo Mẫu pilgrimage and the fulfillment of obligations

Each Đạo Mẫu temple is dedicated to one specific spirit. But, it can be a place for worshiping the spirit pantheon. There are two forms of worshipping a specific spirit: worshiping from afar (thờ vọng) and worshiping at the historical site (thờ chính). Private
shrines or temples often are dedicated to a tutelary spirit whose home temple is in another location. Thus, during special occasions, Đạo Mẫu worshippers participate in pilgrimages to visit the big and important temples (đền to phủ lôm) worshiping spirits at their historical home sites. This is like going to visit and honor tutelary spirits at their main or home temples.

Functionally, a pilgrimage is not part of daily life or a part of the makeup of everyday society (Eade & Coleman, 2004) but is an exceptional religious practice. When I asked my informants if they consider the pilgrimage as a vacation, they said no. One informant said, the word for vacation in Vietnamese meant “going out for relaxing” (di chuyển/nghỉ) while a pilgrimage was a “spiritual working trip” (đi lễ). The pilgrimage is viewed as an activity which results in something productive while a vacation is viewed as a consuming activity, meaning it is a time when money is spent with no results except for fun and relaxation. Informants on these “spiritual working trips” think of themselves as being creative and productive. They are working for good luck and support from the spirits for their family and themselves. Tourists on a vacation spending money and time for pleasure---they are consumers. Informants described going on a pilgrimage as a value-creating act. It is more important than a simple vacation trip because of the spiritual benefits which are accrued. Some see the pilgrimage as enhancing their feeling of self worth, and their confidence. This becomes a valuable experience for all of these reasons and is an activity they look forward to, as religious pilgrims everywhere. Medium Han explained that by participating in the pilgrimage worshippers fulfilled their promises to the spirits for their support and protection:

Our responsibility is to visit sacred places, make offerings and show honor to the spirits. In return, the spirit is responsible to support us. When we
still face bad luck, it means the spirits are testing (thánh thử) us. We should double check ourselves if we serve them well or not.

Aunt Di thought it was important to dress up to “show respect during pilgrimage.” Her peers might dress very casually; even carelessly in everyday life because they were so busy working. However, they made up and dressed nicer during their pilgrimage. The spirits would be happy to see their offspring in a good mood and good appearance. She said her husband supported her going out with the Đạo Mẫu group to pray at far away temples. Her husband shared his opinion on this issue:

Praying at home is good but it is better to pray at a temple because that is the spirit’s home. It will be more respectful to visit the spirits at their hometown during the pilgrimage. Thus, there is no problem for me to take care of the house and our children for few days so that my wife can participate in her pilgrimages.

Participating in pilgrimages is viewed as being part of Đạo Mẫu worshippers’ obligation to serve the spirit (một phần trách nhiệm hầu thánh). Đạo Mẫu worshippers are expected to participate at least in one pilgrimage a year---to personally honor the spirits, and to carry forward their wish for support. However, if one is unable to do so, she can contribute money and ask the master medium to present her petition during the pilgrimage.

Many informants described their feeling of connection with the spirits and the spirit world during pilgrimage time. When they came to a new area, or a temple they had not visited before they said they enjoyed learning new stories about the spirits and Đạo Mẫu beliefs. An informant said when she was at an historical site related to her tutelary spirit (thánh bàn mệnh) she felt like she had achieved a life goal. She could meet with the spirit and introduce herself to the spirit. The spirit knew her and welcomed her as an offspring. This feeling gave her confidence and encouragement because she felt that she
had done the essential and right thing. She said that even after the pilgrimage had ended, that feeling continued to encourage and empower her to be a responsible and good person.

Master medium Than described:

I organize pilgrimages for my disciples every anniversary month around the year. We delay some only when I am sick. We see the broader world of our spirits as well as of Đạo Mẫu. We meet many Đạo Mẫu groups along the way. Everyone is the offspring of the Mother Goddess. I think as the Vietnamese often say “birds have nests, people have their family lines” (chim có tổ, người có tổ), we find our religious home everywhere because our spirits are at every sacred place we go to visit. After pilgrimages, my disciples often feel more secure and found luck coming to their family or their business. If some of my disciples cannot participate in pilgrimages I will pray for them. They usually contribute a small fee for preparing an offering and a petition. When we return from the pilgrimages, everyone including those who cannot go get some spirit-favors.

Informants said being on a pilgrimage brought them a feeling of returning to their “true home.” It was like they were traveling away from their “temporary earthly home” to get closer to or visit their “true home” or religious home at sacred sites. Participating in pilgrimages also brings to Đạo Mẫu women another sense of life accomplishment. It is not only for being closer to spirits or receiving more support from spirits but also for gaining respect and appreciation from the family. An informant ascribed her accomplishments as a good mother and a good wife being the result of her frequent participation in pilgrimages or visiting her “true home”—also her source of “power.” Her family appreciated her because they saw her efforts to fulfill the spiritual obligations of the family and appreciated her efforts to bring good fortune to the family. Currying the favor of the spirits was seen as important as getting a job and contributing a salary to the family.
Pilgrims are often very strong and energetic when they are on a pilgrimage, much as children are excited to go and visit a favorite family member. Many informants said the reason they felt stronger was because of their feeling that they were on a special duty to serve the spirits for themselves and their family. Master medium Vy said that on one occasion they went directly to fourteen temples in two days and two nights. They went on a big bus and didn’t stop to sleep. People slept and ate on the bus. They stopped at each temple to make offerings and worship and had the lễn dòng ritual at the last temple. She showed me the video tape of her lễn dòng ritual which lasted seven hours at the last temple.

Medium Di, a 70 year old woman who had participated in many pilgrimages over thirty years as a medium, she shared:

During the 1980s, we all were very poor. However, we still had two pilgrimages together a year. In the third lunar month we went to Giây palace in Nam Định to worship Mother Goddess Liên Hạnh. In the eighth lunar month we went to Cô Son, Kiếp Bác to worship General Trần. It was a custom to remember: “in the eighth lunar month is Father’s death anniversary and in the third lunar month is Mother’s death anniversary” (tháng 8 giỗ cha, tháng 3 giỗ mẹ). We didn’t have our own bus like nowadays. Everyone including our religious teacher went to the bus station and traveled together in a public bus and walked or hiked to the sacred places. The offerings were very simple including some fruits, homemade candies and cookies, rice cakes and paper money. Instead of paper goods like fancy horses, elephants or paper human we bought a picture-drawing of everything and offer that to the spirits. We didn’t have singers and musicians and had lễn dòng rituals without music and songs (hâu vo). We brought rice cakes (com nấm), sesame salt (muối ớt) and boiled eggs to eat along the way. I was often sick and tired those days but I rarely skipped any pilgrimage with my group.

43 The 20th of the eighth lunar month is Father’s death anniversary to memorialize General Trần Hưng Đạo, a historical figure (Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 2006). Sometimes, it is considered a death anniversary of King Bát Hải, a legendary figure. His death anniversary is on the 22th of the eighth lunar month (Trương Thìn, 2004:144). They are symbols of the Father in a correlated notion with the Mother of Đạo Mẫu. Resulting from the yin yang principle, it is essential for Vietnamese to think dually “there is Mother meaning there is Father” (Đã có mẹ là có cha). Although the Father doesn’t play any crucial role in Đạo Mẫu, it is necessary to have the symbol of the Father for harmony.
I participated in a pilgrimage to Tuyen Quang (a highland province in Northern Vietnam) with medium Nguyệt and her medium friends from the old quarter of Hanoi (see figure 39). They went on a one-day pilgrimage to worship the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests and other Ladies and Princesses of thirteen temples in Tuyen Quang. The pilgrimage was organized in the first lunar month, “the month of relaxing” (tháng ăn chơi) in Vietnam. Informants said they chose this time as being auspicious, a good time following a hard working year and before the start of the New Year. This time ---the month of the lunar year was considered a free-of-work month, a holiday month, for many Vietnamese and this added to the festive feeling everyone seemed to experience.

Figure 39: Offerings Prepared for a One-day Pilgrimage
Their one-day pilgrimage started at 3 AM. Everyone was ready for pick up at bus stops or at the main temple. The group made frequent stops at thirteen temples along the way to make offerings and have a prayer-based ritual. At small temples, they took a quick visit and made a small offering. The group spent a longer time at the temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess of Upland Forests for a lê/Instruction ritual and lunch.

At each temple, the master medium placed offerings on the main altar, a petition sheet to spirits for the whole group; lighted the incense sticks and prayed. Some pilgrims prepared their own petition sheets to spirits to specifically address and pray for their own families---this is a common individual option for members of the entourage. After worshiping, they took the petition sheet and paper money to burn in the paper burning oven outside the temple. The other offerings were saved as spirit-favors to share with pilgrims after going back to their hometown. The food offerings (lễ mặn) were shared at lunch.

I participated in another one-day pilgrimage with Master Medium Than’s group on June 26, 2009. This pilgrimage was organized on the anniversary of the death of the Third Mandarin spirit. We went to three temples dedicated to the Third Mandarin spirit in three provinces in one day. The Lành Giang temple is at the hometown of the Mandarin. The second temple is where the Mandarin died by execution. The Xích Đằng temple is where people found the Mandarin’s head after his execution by the enemy.

On the bus, master medium Than and other mediums shared stories about the Third Mandarin spirit. One high school student who sat next to me was so surprised to learn about the Third Mandarin spirit’s life. She told me that Lành Giang was her
hometown but she had never known about it having such a famous hometown hero. For her it was a history lesson made live, and in the company of her new sisters.

During a long pilgrimage Đạo Mẫu women often go to worship and stay overnight at one temple before going to another temple. Since the 1990s, when the government began promoting festivals and ritual activities, many Đạo Mẫu temples have renovated their facilities to include space for visiting worshippers to sleep and prepare food and eat together. The pilgrimage organizer contacts each temple’s care-taker (thủ nhang or đồng đèn) in advance to confirm their schedule for performing the lên đồng ritual and requesting accommodations. If the temple is too small to host a big group, there are households around the temple to provide accommodations. This service of accommodating visiting worshippers, combined with the selling of offerings and goods has become a business for residents of many temple areas.

In all the pilgrimages I have been on, the things I remember most are the warm fellowship shared by all, and the noisy sounds of chatting and teasing on the long bus ride. It was like going on a vacation trip with family which I will explain in the next section.

6.3.3. The Đạo Mẫu pilgrimage and the communitas in the lives of Đạo Mẫu women

Đạo Mẫu pilgrimages include pilgrims, worshiping spirits, the seeking of spirits’ supports and sacred places. All these provide the women of Đạo Mẫu an opportunity to gain spiritual solace and strength, a chance to acquire skills and knowledge, and an opportunity to travel and see new places and broaden their horizons with a compatible group of women---their sisterhood. The pilgrimage, thus, is a journey which creates a holy space for worshippers. It serves as a connecting link between the worshippers of
different temples and provides the worshippers on pilgrimage with a sense of a bigger communitas. In addition, the place or space of pilgrimage is a motion or movement. This, in itself is liminality created for pilgrims during their journey.

The establishment of communitas has been a focal point of Đạo Mẫu religious practices. From the beginning of the pilgrimage, the pilgrims start their liminal status and maintain this status during the length of the pilgrimage until they go back to their hometown. New living conditions with new spaces, new people, and new activities from their everyday life experience enable the communitas to be established among the pilgrims. They are free to create a social bond where all members are equal. As a creative and transformative process, “communitas” creates social equality, solidarity, and a shared purpose among group members. This process enables group members to reconsider together the way in which they act and to find dramatically different solutions for living.

While informants often distinguish between going on pilgrimages (đi lễ) and going on vacations (đi chơi), many of them said that they enjoyed discovering sacred spaces, sightseeing along the way and having fun with their peers during the pilgrimage, just as if they were on a vacation. Going out for a day or few days and being free from all family and work obligations was viewed as being a rejuvenating experience. Meeting new and old friends, and feeling closer with the spirits during the pilgrimage allows worshippers to separate themselves from the pressures of everyday life. For many, the pilgrimage becomes a source of self actualization since they have a chance to realize long held dreams, and the sense of sisterhood they experience helps reinforce their identity as women.

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44 For more information on the Đạo Mẫu communitas, see Chapter 5.
Medium Kha felt everyone on the pilgrimage was equal or as she said, of “the same group on the same boat” (cùng hối cùng thủy). She said:
When we invite each other to go together on a pilgrimage, there are no differences between us. Although everyone might have different life circumstances we all believe in heaven and earth (đất trời) and in the spirits with a shared sincere heart (có tâm). So we feel understanding and support for each other.

Communitas also has its personal dimension. As a transitional phase, communitas produces sacred meanings within individuals. Part of this sacredness is achieved through the humility learned in this transition that allows the personal experience of togetherness with others to be felt. The group of individuals crosses a threshold collectively. This creates a need of being together and creating something new and more exciting for every member outside of dutiful everyday life. This network creates sisterhoods where women can help each other learn life skills, release their everyday stresses and where they are encouraged to pursue their dreams.

Sightseeing and sisterhood experiences during a pilgrimage provide different kinds of joy and happiness for the women outside of their families. The pilgrimage produces new awareness of life meanings and values. Informants described their activities during the pilgrimage very differently from their everyday life experiences. They reported they felt themselves leaving the world of the secular to enter a place of spirits and magic. The liminal space-time in between the temples of the pilgrimage gives the women a chance to question themselves about their spiritual and personal goals. It provides opportunities for Đạo Mâu women to go beyond the static life of unchangeable obligations to achieve some level of fulfillment. They are at the “threshold” of their old social status as a woman bound by family and a new social status as a person in herself without any life burdens. This experience is a tremendous opportunity for their growth, self exploration of the purpose and meaning of their lives. This then becomes an empowering experience for the women of Đạo Mâu.
Looking at the communitas established during the pilgrimages I wondered whether pilgrimages have to break down existing social structures to create a communal identity. Some researchers stated that pilgrimages reinforce social integration while maintaining social boundaries (Stanley 1992 and Karve 1962) while some further believed that pilgrimages could not “eliminate social divisions” but could “attenuate them” (Turner 1974:207). Turner also admitted “the stress has been on the communitas of the pilgrimage, rather than on the individual’s penance on the journey” (1978:39).

In the pilgrimage, boundaries between the rich and the poor, and higher and lower statuses are eliminated since all are the children of the Mother Goddess; everyone comes to ask for support from the spirit, to feel unburdened, to share, to understand and to encourage. This may change when the pilgrimage finishes and everyone returns home. However, the true existence of communitas at the resting and quiet moments in one’s life creates a chance for people to participate in a special network for a better life.

In contemporary societies, according to Geertz (1973a) mobility, is viewed as a metaphor and process at the heart of social life and should be central to sociological analysis. The pilgrimage is one form of mobility which is not only a process but a metaphor for what is at the heart of the social life of Đạo Mẫu women. Mobility becomes a quality of life and a living condition which they become aware of and adopt. Thus, the process of movement in being with other peers is also a metaphor of a moving or changing world that women interact with and engage actively in to make the world work for them. This metaphor and process is different from the lifecycle rituals which literarily change who these women are and make them into completely new people or new beings. The pilgrimage enables Đạo Mẫu women to be a persona which is already in them. By
leaving the social structure, it renews and re-inspires this persona instead of changing or transforming one being into another being. The spiritual power from the spirit world is the resource for enabling this process to occur.

A pilgrimage thus provides a larger network of friends, a long lasting series of social activities. Living with family obligations, it seems unusual for a woman to leave her homes for a vacation herself. However, the pilgrimage provides a socially acceptable justification to validate going out and having fun with other peers because it is not a vacation but a sacred trip for carrying out a spiritual duty. This explains how the vacation qualities are veiled by the purpose of the pilgrimage. Even in a patriarchal family or within a male dominant structure, these religious obligations observed by women are validated and respected. The pilgrimage in the other word legitimates the women’s motivation and excuse for being free from the nexus of the life obligations and to enjoy life in a communitas of women and in a journey of self discovery.

6.4. Conclusion

The temple and the pilgrimages serve as vehicles for the empowerment of the women of Đạo Mẫu. Both act to empower by focusing on internal and personal change, rather than by external means—the imposition of law or moral dictates. The Đạo Mẫu in general empowers by allowing the women to develop soft power—self confidence and personal identity, practical life management skills and a means of dealing with the stresses of daily living. It also provides opportunities for financial well being through religion related career opportunities and businesses related to temple activities. Soft power enables the women of the Đạo Mẫu to deal more effectively with life situations within the traditional values of Vietnamese culture.
The temples play an important part of this transformation by offering women a place, a sense of belonging, and a place for spiritual rejuvenation through communion with the spirits, privately, or through spirit possession in the lên dòng ceremony. The environment, though usually modest and humble, provides a comfortable place to rest and be restored by the presence of the spirits and other believers, the sisterhood and communitas. The Đạo Mẫu build no grand structures, the temples focus on comforts and familiarity. Interestingly, while the Đạo Mẫu religious practice provides opportunities for women to self-actualize themselves to escape their everyday life obligations, they do this paradoxically by promoting the value of family. Thus, the promotion of the relationship of the Mother Goddess to the worshippers as a self defining relationship and the many reminders of family is reflected in the pantheon of the spirits worshipped. Spirits may act violently or meanly at different times, but mostly they support and nurture, like a family member.

The pilgrimage is a fun activity and a time of pleasure seeking and enjoyment. It is a time of mixed feelings---the excitement of meeting new and old friends, of seeing new places and hearing old stories, of insights gained through periods of introspection and spiritual awakening and knowledge traditions, of self discovery and recognition by family and peers of their commitment to the religion and the effort to seek improved conditions for the family---it is all of these and more. For the organizers it is a chance to reinforce organizational, management and communication skills, and to gain the gratitude and recognition of peers for their efforts. For others who supported the activities, it is a chance to earn some money and explore options for financial self sufficiency. One participant spoke of the warm welcome she felt while on the long bus ride and the
empowering feeling of sisterhood that overwhelmed her. This seemed to be the hallmark response of most worshippers.

It “is true that the pilgrim returns to his former mundane existence, but it is commonly believed that [s]he has made a spiritual step forward” (Turner 1978:15). Journeying is said to bring the possibility of creating social and/or psychological transformation, even if only on a temporary basis, and here we see the adaptation of Van Gennep’s depiction of life as a series of transactions (1960: 1-2.)

The analysis of Đạo Mẫu temple and pilgrimages provides rich data on another province of the lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women. It leads to another way of organizing the meaning of Đạo Mẫu in women’s lives. It promises access to their self-actualizing and self-recreating of life values and meanings in a world of motion. It informs that the space-time sphere of Đạo Mẫu temple and pilgrimage is not just a measure but an aspect of the ways in which we interact with the world and has consequences for both the individual and society. At the same time, the discovery of how the space-time of the Đạo Mẫu temple and pilgrimage affects the life of Đạo Mẫu women leads to other concerns. These are about how these women’s lives will be influenced by the ludic spirit of the religious practices, as well as how the religious practices have changed under modernization and secularization. This is the focus of the next chapter.
 CHAPTER 7.
THE LUDIC SPIRIT AND THE SECULARIZATION OF ĐẠO MÃU RELIGIOUS PRACTICES 
IN THE LIVES OF ĐẠO MÃU WOMEN

7.1. Introduction

Religion and its rituals are often viewed as being solemn and serious. However, some scholars believe that while the religious ritual is seriousness at its highest and holiest, it can also be play or not as serious as it may appear, particularly from the perspective of the worshipper. These scholars believe ritual acts and festivals and ceremonies are often structured so as to include a lighter side—a playful side, a sense of mirth, even of burlesque (Huizinga 1950 and Blake, forthcoming publication).

As religions modernize and embrace technology, ritual values and religious and spiritual functions may change in ways that exploit this ludic spirit in the form of entertainment and cultural exhibition. This can occur through processes of politicization and/or commercialization, and in any case, raise the question of authenticity of the ritual practice (Benjamin 1936, Blunden translated in 1995).

In Vietnam, there has been a resurgence of Đạo Mẫu religious practices since the 1980s and 1990s. This happened under an important shift in the government’s support of traditional culture and religion during a reform movement known as Đổi mới (renovation). This action reflected recognition of the importance of the practices of the Đạo Mẫu in the traditional ludic culture of Vietnam—-that aspect of culture which emphasizes recreational or play activities. The approval of Đạo Mẫu religious practices as folkloristic art practices has had a major impact in the modernization of Đạo Mẫu. The
adoption of media technology since the 1990s has also promoted a change in the ritual practices and ceremonial presentations of Dao Mâu.

Following a Weberian theme, although modernization does not spell the end of religion per se, it does entail secularization of religion. This chapter asks at what point does the ludic spirit in the traditional spiritual plays actually become the entertainment value in the modern secular aesthetic or commercial spirit in Dao Mâu religious practice? At times the line between the acts as religious acts and as simply entertainment is blurred. It is not easy at this point to tell whether this blurring is intrinsic to the traditional practices or is the result of modernization. Indeed in time the temple festivals which at the beginning may have had deeply religious significance become an occasion for celebration and play.

This chapter explores how the Dao Mâu traditional religious practices have a built in ludic structure or how the ludic spirit itself turns the traditional ritual into another tradition or another nature of the ritual practice. It also describes and analyzes the process of politicizing and commercializing parts of the Dao Mâu ritual and the overall practices of secularization.

The chapter begins with the descriptions of the manifestation of ludic spirit in the Dao Mâu ritual practice in which the ludic spirit as a form of ritual mystification maintains the sacred values or the traditional seriousness of the ritual. It continues to explore how official Vietnam allows Dao Mâu legitimacy for purposes of national identity and political stability. In this context the ritual practice is changed into a form of folk art which carries both sacred and commercial values. The chapter then follows with an analysis of the commercialization of ritual performances for entertainment value and
the ways modern media technology breeds popularity as well as vulgarity of the ritual practice. In these contexts, the ritual practice has changed into a performance art form and then has used media technology to make the ritual performances more accessible to the public, and in the process commercialized the performances. These changes have built on the reification of the beliefs as part of a modern ideology and thus removed much of the ritual mystification in the process of secularizing the ritual practice. In describing how women empower themselves in the ritual performances, this chapter questions whether this empowerment is traditional or more of a current modern phenomenon. It also looks at how secularization contributes to the generation of soft power in the women of Đạo Mẫu.

7.2. The manifestation of a ludic spirit in the traditional seriousness of Đạo Mẫu religious practices

7.2.1. The play-element of Đạo Mẫu religious practices

Huizinga in his study on Homo Ludens observes that men as the player in acting play-elements elevate the performance to its highest level of seriousness. He states “life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest” (1950: 212). At the center of play, people often pretend to act as someone different from their ordinary world for fun and enjoyment. Ritual playing and performances in the form of festival dancing or the dancing of mediums and shamans while under the spell of the spirits can lead to “regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public” (Huizinga 1950: 1). This view is true to many Đạo Mẫu mediums who strive to make their performances into a contest between
mediums—through their dress and inspired movements. All of this is aimed at getting public appreciation and recognition, and more substantial gifts from worshippers.

Traditionally, Đạo Mẫu mediums often think of their ritual performances as being divinely inspired. Their movements reflect the possession by the spirits and thus become naturally inspired, genuinely charismatic, and not practiced and staged. They explain that their dancing and performance skills come from spirit empowerment (phép Mẫu) or the teaching of the spirits (Thánh dây). Some described their feelings of pride and happiness in being praised by worshippers for their talent in dancing and acting when they perform in ceremonies and rituals. To a certain extent, thus, the rituals and ceremonial performances become a kind of folk drama which over time come to be appreciated apart from their religious significance. Mediums begin to be known for their beauty and performance skills as well as their spiritual powers. This development is important as the temples gradually become a center of cultural entertainment and social life, as well as a center for religious worship of the Mother Goddess and the ritual offering of gifts.

Madame Ha, a medium of some prominence and a street vendor in her ordinary life said:

On my Initiation Ritual, I had only seen some spirit incarnation acts by my religious leader, so I followed her example. However, my husband and his friends who were actors, musicians and singers at the national traditional theater said I did so well that it was like I was trained professionally. How could I know about it without practicing the ritual, you know.

Master medium Mi shared one of the reasons she became a master medium:

I was a pretty 26-year-old woman at that time. When I saw older mediums practicing their spirit incarnation, it was so colorful, fancy and special. I thought I could be more beautiful than they because of my youth and beauty. My husband did not understand anything about Đạo Mẫu but he supported me because I was his young, beautiful wife. He might feel that I was more attractive at the ritual performance.
Medium Nam, a retired post office official and who used to hide the fact of her involvement in Đạo Mẫu activities from her colleagues and family, was always so proud of her costume and her ritual performance. She said:

I always create some new designs for my costume. For the Dame and Royal Damsel spirit incarnations, I often have a thin embroidered gown outside the main costume. Thus, my dances look more feminine. I like to watch movies and imagine about how to recreate or renew my costume as well as my dance and acting at the lên đồng ritual. It is a folk art form. So, we should be creative to make it more beautiful and more meaningful. However, not everyone has good taste and knowledge about these issues. Some neither understand nor care about invention or creation or art. Unlike them, I initially learned literature at college as well as carried artistic taste and competence from my father and my grandfather too.

Master medium Ba, Mi and Chi, each lead a separate temple with a separate group of followers. They are close friends. They often organize pilgrimages for their followers together in a spirit of cooperativeness and friendship. However, during the pilgrimage, while they perform the lên đồng ritual, they seem to be very strongly competing to win the admiration of their collective audience, especially from their own followers.

Master medium Ba is the oldest of the group. She is not as flexible and her body is not as supple as Medium Chi and not as imposing and strong as Medium Mi. But, she said her appearance is attractive and appealing to the audience.

Master medium Mi is the most beautiful one (according to the followers’ judgment) but her performance is often too masculine in her Royal Damsel spirit incarnations. Thus, she mostly performs the Mandarin spirit incarnations and has very short Royal Damsel spirit incarnations.

When I met with them individually after the ritual, each one analyzed in great detail each person’s performance, much like a coach and competitors would do after the event, or a kumu hula would evaluate the strong and weak aspects of their performance in
a competition. They also had and shared their opinions as who was more successful as a master medium and why. The continuous critique and self assessment provided clear evidence of the competitive nature of their performances.

After the “pretending” or friendly competition, master medium Mi told me:

We ate with our own followers at separate tables, took time to share about ritual experiences with our small community before getting back together in the pilgrimage.

This practiced routine suggests that even the master mediums need the affirmation and the emotional support by their own followers after the heated competition so they can get back together to fulfill the mission of the pilgrimage. I saw this as being similar to Olympic athletes competing as individuals and country representatives, seeking to perform well and win an event, but seeking the support of team members while competing. In observing these competitions, it seems to be clear that this spirit of competing is a confidence building exercise benefiting the competitors directly and the followers or team members indirectly. Pride in winning, and in competing is a quality that my interviewees noted is easily transferred from temple activities to life world situations. I suppose this spirit of competition is deeply implicit in the tradition. However, under modern conditions, it becomes explicit.

7.2.2. The Đạo Mẫu ritual: A dramatic creation of the desired imaginary world for the formation of a new self and of social grouping among Đạo Mẫu women

In his analysis of the nature and significance of play, Huizinga notes that one significant social function of ritual acts is the power to transport the participants to another world. In Đạo Mẫu tradition ritual performance of the medium is often viewed and is spoken of as making an image of “something different, something more beautiful, or something more sublime, or more dangerous” and daring than what she usually is and
what the world she customarily lives in is. This is the imagined or mystical world. Here she could be the Mother Goddess, the Mandarin or the Prince. Her performances have the power to transport the worshipper to another world. If as some might, compare this to how audiences experience a good play or dance performance or movie in the present day, the presence of Mother Goddess in the performances of the medium and her followers is of a different order of things. In this spirit world, the medium and her worshippers become the people they want to be and can act and live the way they want.

However, for the Đạo Mẫu worshippers in the spirit world, the sacred performance creates only a temporary order. This temporary order is supreme and absolute but only for the transitory moment. If the real ordinary world is an imperfect world with the confusion of life, the sacred performance brings a temporary and limited perfection. Where the medium is aware that she is acting and the world created by her performance is imaginary at the higher levels, her ritual performance acquires a kind of reality. She doesn’t lose her consciousness of the ordinary reality. She is making a new consciousness of herself as a new being without losing consciousness of her existent being. Thus, ritual performances successfully enable the performer and the ritual participants to self-realize, self-actualize, and self-recreate as well as renew themselves. The performances thus can become cathartic and refreshing.

Examples of this phenomenon exist in spirit incarnations of the lênhống ritual of Đạo Mẫu. These spirit incarnations are performed in a hierarchical order based on a spirit ranking system of the Đạo Mẫu pantheon. In the early spirit incarnations, the performer dresses up like the royal figures and acts nobly and seriously like officials at their formal offices with public credentials to demonstrate their power. However, in the later spirit
incarnations, she acts more casually and playfully, plays and dresses as a vivacious and innocent little boy or little girl.

As the ritual performances advance and the spirit incarnations emerge, the medium who is now a performer and her ritual participants can become more interactive, teasing and challenging each other or exchanging performance challenges. The ritual participants even stand up, dance and sing with the performer. This represents the desire of Đạo Mâu worshippers to leave their adult world which is full of responsibilities and obligations to go to a pure and innocent world which is full of play and enjoyment.

Another example where a religious ritual evolves into play occurs with the canonical order of each spirit incarnation of the \( \text{lên dòng} \) ritual. The performer starts with formal sacred acts like receiving spirit incarnation, bowing with lit incenses and communicating with the spirit world. The next ritual acts are dancing, enjoying music and songs and communicating with the living participants of the ritual. The imagination of the medium moving from the real world to spirit world and then coming back to the real world with a new identification, a representation of another being requires imaginary orders that the performer and the audience need to agree together. The order is made out of their shared belief in the spirit world.

By participating in this order, this performance, Đạo Mâu women experience a sense of belonging totally to a social community, a sense of social solidarity without material interest and within certain “boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means” (Huizinga 1950).
7.3. The official ideology and the legitimacy of Đạo Mậu

In Vietnam, there is a resurgence of Đạo Mậu religious practices under the important shift in the government’s approach to culture and religion during the Đời mới reform period. Although the reforms began in 1986, it took long time for the state authority to legitimize the Đạo Mậu religious practices. Đạo Mậu used to be considered “superstitious” (mê tín dị đoan). According to the effort of many scholars, particularly the work of the Folk Culture Institute, the official attitude gradually changed to promote a view of the Đạo Mậu religious practices as “religious –cultural activities of the community” (sinh hoạt tín ngưỡng-văn hóa cộng đồng) (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992, 1996a, cf. Norton 2009:6). Thus, the revival of such traditional culture is important to building a national identity (bản sắc dân tộc).

Norton states:

The view of mediumship (Đạo Mậu religion) as a survival of ancient folk beliefs has been marshaled in support of arguments that indigenous cultural values and practices, which are increasingly perceived by cultural nationalists as being eroded by the forces of globalization and growing international influences, need to be preserved (2009:7).

The official ideology allowing Đạo Mậu legitimacy for purposes of cultivating a national identity and promoting political stability in fact has changed Đạo Mậu ritual practice into a form of folk art. This is to promote the cultural values of the religion instead of its religious functions. However, while the official ideology is trying to promote the ritual practice as national folkloric art performance, it unintentionally dismisses the line between the sacred or ceremonial and the commercial performances. Gradually, there is no contradiction between the performance for cultural identity and that for commercial or tourism purposes. The change shows how the official ideology has
legitimized Đạo Mẫu and unintentionally promoted the commercialization of Đạo Mẫu and its ritual practice.

Among the first sign of the resurgence of Đạo Mẫu religion under the influence of the reform policy, the Vietnamese government promoted Đạo Mẫu ritual practices as a national folkloric art performance. In 1996, a competition of lên đồng ritual performances was held at Phú Tây Hồ (West Lake Palace) in Hanoi in conjunction with an international conference on the Đạo Mẫu. The performers were all Đạo Mẫu mediums. Interestingly, their performances were judged by a committee of some researchers of Đạo Mẫu and government officials. Being national folkloric art performances, the mediums at this competition no longer focused on the religious purity and the fervor of the medium but on the aesthetics of the performances.

As master medium Ba observed:

All ritual performances focused on the aesthetic factor not the religious act. The ritual performance had the tendency to be beautiful with a lot of tension. My friend who got the second place was supposed to get the first place. She was the best but she gave up the first place since she did not want to be too aggressive. Everyone knew that she was the most experienced and skillful medium.

It surprised me to hear about the issue of getting the first place in the competition. However, what is interesting here is that the participant [of the context] truly acted as the player of a game. In a game, as Huizinga suggests, performance is outside the range of good or bad. It is a testing of the player skills such as the courage, tenacity, resource, spiritual prowess or the fairness (1950:11). To master medium Ba, the highest achievement is not to win but to gain harmony. In her opinion the second place winner was clearly the best—the winner, for this reason. So while the performance of this ritual may be perceived as having strayed from its religious roots to be a cultural performance
in itself, the standards of the religion were the standards for medium Ba judging the performance.

Recently, in 2010, the first national festival of Châu văn, the sacred music and songs of lễ đồng rituals was held at Thiên Viện Trúc Lâm in Vĩnh Phúc. The performers included professional musicians and singers as well as Đạo Mẫu musicians and singers. While the professionals appeared in the traditional Đạo Mẫu costumes, their performances were clearly not for religious purposes but purely for entertainment purposes. The religious rites associated with Đạo Mẫu more clearly evolved its value as a form of cultural entertainment as the movement modernized and commercialized (see figure 41).

Businessmen in both public and private sectors, sensitive to the customer’s tastes, promote the popularity of ritual observances for commercial gain. Supported by the official ideology at some cultural parks, tourist sites and resorts lễ đồng ritual performances are introduced as part of their entertainment packages. At Thiên Đường Bảo Sơn (Bảo Sơn Cultural Paradise), a national cultural park in An Khanh, Hanoi, lễ đồng ritual performances have become an important feature of their cultural program---staged primarily to attract the tourists (see figure 42).
Figure 41: Châu văn National Festival in 2010
7.4. The secularization of ritual performances under the influence of modern technology

Modern influences have moved the Lên dông ritual performance of Đạo Mẫu from its spiritual context to become entertainment, a kind of modern entertainment where the lavish expenditure of funds prevails and creates a new standard. The performances of the Lên dông rituals have begun to acquire a life of their own as a cultural presentation, apart
from their role as a primary religious ritual of the Đạo Mẫu. What was and still is the ongoing ritual performance in celebration of the Mother Goddess and a performance of a medium possessed by the spirits has become more commercialized. This change however has been widely exercised by the followers of the Đạo Mẫu, and has made the movement more popular and accessible.

The commercialization of the religious performances of the Đạo Mẫu has become the major force changing Đạo Mẫu and making the spirit world reified, commoditized and ever more secularized—to better serve and fit in the lives of the worshippers in modern times. While traditionalists may view these changes as demeaning and denigrating and blasphemy of the spirit, the changes have had the effect of making observance of the Đạo Mẫu rituals more popular than ever. The people who participate in the so called “religious practices” or lênh đồng ritual performances on a casual basis now comprise a much larger number than the members or traditional worshippers of Đạo Mẫu. At the same time it makes the so called Đạo Mẫu religious practices much more secular and ordinary than ever.

7.4.1. Modern technological modes of production and reproduction: the popularity and vulgarity of Đạo Mẫu ritual practice

In a recent study of paper money custom in China, Blake illustrates how the revolutionary means of visual reproduction including recorders, cameras and printing machines has made substantive changes in term of the presentation and the use of traditional religious practices (Blake, forthcoming). The lênh đồng ritual is subject to the same forces. The modern technological modes of production basically remove the lênh đồng ritual from its ritual context in the temple toward an entertainment oriented extravaganza and its reproduction, representation in “realistic detail.” In other words,
modern technological modes of production and reproduction breed popularity and vulgarity of Đạo Mẫu ritual practice.

The performance of lên đồng ritual or Châu văn music has become available in a wide variety of formats including audio, video and digital tapes. These ritual performance reproductions are often performed by professional actresses and actors, singers and musicians rather than the Đạo Mẫu medium and temple musicians. Anyone can buy and own these reproductions at a cost of only 5000 VND. If you search on Google for video clips on lên đồng ritual or châu văn music, you get thousands of hits just in a few seconds. These video clips are often taken of the real ritual on a telephone camera or by a professional cameraman (see figure 43).

Figure 43: Online Resources of Đạo Mẫu and Lên đồng Rituals

Some traditionalists hold that these reproductions are devoid of any spiritual value and inauthentic. They feel that these productions have lost their presence---“the presence of the original is prerequisite to the concept of authentic” (Benjamin 1936:3). Benjamin
states this situation “enables the original to meet the beholder halfway” as “the cathedra leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room” (1936:4).

Watching these reproductions, there is no such in-person communication or a spiritual connection between the medium and the ritual participants. The participants are thus seen as an audience rather than a participant---similar to a person watching any kind of television drama or movie or sports event. The level of involvement and interaction has been reduced tremendously. It loses the spiritual context in which the temple performer and the participants share core values of a common belief in the spiritual world. The access of the audience to the ritual performance is dependent on the cameraman’s eyes the editor’s skills and his technical skills. The cameraman decides to choose which image to capture with enlargement or slow motion using different sources of light and he even inserts several natural scenes outside the temple while editing the final motion pictures.

This relationship changes exactly as Benjamin analyzes:

This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience’s identification with the actor is really the identification with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera; it approach is testing. This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed (1936:10).

The professional actor and actress pretending to be a Đạo Mẫu medium to perform at a studio is truly different from a Đạo Mẫu medium practicing her lễn dòng ritual at a Đạo Mẫu temple. The audience of the production is quite different from the participants in the Đạo Mẫu medium lễn dòng ritual. The medium performing in front of
a cameraman knowing that her acting is being filmed is not the same medium since as she now assumes the persona of an actress.

This commercialization does of course have its positive aspects as it creates a wider audience of worshippers and introduces the rituals and the “gospel” of Đạo Mẫu to the masses of society members. This change—the commercialization of Đạo Mẫu through use of media, appears to be widely accepted by most rather than be rejected as a kind of heresy. Most of mediums I interviewed proudly show me their pictures or video tape of their lễ động ritual (see figures 44 and 45). They play the DVD at home or at a friend’s house many times and explain about the action, the gesture, the movement or costumes and etc. They even make some copies of the tape to give their relatives or friends. Acceptance of use of media is widely supported by the medium as it makes them feel like popular actresses and rich performers.
Figure 44: Spirit Incarnations in a Video Tape of a Lênh đòng Ritual

Figure 45: Taking Photo of a Lênh đòng Ritual
A new industry has emerged providing essential support services for the commercialization of the Đạo Mẫu. These include flower shops which provide temple decorations, costume rental shops, stylists and makeup artists, photographers and graphic designers, as well as a coterie of professional musicians and dancers, and actresses. What was once authentic and spiritual has become less authentic and spiritual, but in the process has created jobs and career options and a road to riches for many. Medium Lan who owns a big flower shop where Đạo Mẫu mediums often buy to decorate the temple shared this observation:

Before, lên đồng rituals were practiced quietly. Of course it was because lên đồng ritual practice was prohibited by the state for long time. However, it was also because of its nature as the solemn and spiritual practice. We didn’t have live Châu văn music, only few black and white costumes with simple offerings. The smell of incense, the taste of wine and cigarette and the exhortation of the participants were strong enough for us to fulfill our spiritual connection and obligation. Nowadays, the medium needs a lot of colorful costumes, help from make-up experts and assistants to create colorful decorations at the temple for their lên đồng rituals. Châu văn music is performed like a band with speakers, microphones and amplifiers.

Medium Lan’s daughter, a new medium added:

Besides the smell of incense, the taste of wine and cigarettes and the exhortation of the audience and the spiritual atmosphere I need to hear loud sound and feel admiring the splendid scene to perform a successful lên đồng ritual.

Other services following the religious practices are becoming more popular. There are shops for the medium who needs to rent costumes if they cannot afford expensive and elaborate ones. The only traditional costume each Đạo Mẫu medium needs to have is a red veil (khăn phủ diễm) which is the symbol of the door between the real world and the spirit world. Now there is need for more elaborate costumes and then need for make-up, picture and video making services, the equivalents of production assistants,
grips, backdrop technicians and sound technicians as in a movie or television production. These new jobs are lucrative and there is a lot of competition for the jobs. An assistant of the medium can be paid between 500,000 ($25 USD) to 10,000,000 ($500 USD) per ritual service. This is in a country where a new teacher at the University with a Masters degree makes less than $125USD a month.

When my husband joined me on my interviewing trips to take photos and video footage of the ritual performances, many of my interviewees welcomed him enthusiastically when they found out he is a professional photographer and a graphic designer. Some of them asked him for photos and help in updating photo albums and websites. His presence was a boon as in exchange we were invited as guests to observe certain ritual performances not observed by outsiders. Amusingly, he often got more spirit money gifts than other worshippers from the host medium.

**7.4.2. The commercialization of ritual performance for entertainment value**

The commercialization of the Đạo Mẫu has continued, and has even given rise to a new industry---the production of video and audio tapes of *lên dòng* ritual performances and *Chầu văn* ritual music. These tapes are sold for both entertainment and ritual purposes. Purchasers are both worshippers for the Đạo Mẫu as well as professional actors and singers using these materials as teaching aids. Lan, medium Ba’s sister, a Vietnamese Canadian, told me she bought a *Chầu văn* audio tape performed by a professional singer, Xuan Hinh, to bring with her to Canada. She said that when she practices her *lên dòng* rituals, she has no access to live *Chầu văn* musicians and singers so she would turn on the tape during each spirit incarnation.
While an observer who is not Vietnamese may view these developments as profane, the strategies employed are no different than the commercialization of religion undertaken in many countries, such as in the United States by the tele-evangelists selling tapes, and books and religious trinkets and charms to the members of their churches. Whether the benefit of spiritual support is gained or not, the church or temple and the priestesses and mediums and clergy clearly get richer.

*Lên dòng* ritual performances are also seen in the movies. In one of the most popular “soap operas” on Vietnamese television, *Chạy án* (Twisting Justice), the main character calls on the spiritual force of the Mother Goddess to help her son to avoid legal punishment. Huong Dung, the actress acting as this character was asked by the reporter whether she was herself a medium or had acquired the powers of a medium given her skillful performance of the *lên dòng* rituals. She described how she could perform the *lên dòng* ritual in the movie:

To prepare for this scene, I bought a video tape of 36 spirit incarnations of Đạo Mẫu to learn. I had never practiced or watched a hâu đồng before so I asked an experience đồng to teach me how to dance and sing such as hand movements or holding fire candles. I realized that the hâu đồng performer when incarnating the spirit is “shocked” for a moment with a feeling like holding the entire self-energy for the spirit incarnation and collapsed after finishing the performance. My đồng teacher and I both are so surprised about my performance. The group of actors and actresses in this movie were also surprised about my hâu đồng performance (Thanh Huyen, *Rural Economic News*, May 21, 2008).

Another huge influence of the media technology on Đạo Mẫu ritual is the variety of its paper offerings. As Blake’s analysis in his study of paper money custom in China, the paper offerings in Vietnam also face rapid change because of “the invasion of exotic objects” and the “shift in the mode of production from hand to machine” (Blake forthcoming). Every temple often has its own retail dealer of paper offerings. The cost
sold by the retail dealer is always much cheaper than the market price. These paper offerings will be “redistributed” for many ritual services, of course with the market price paid by temple worshippers or the medium who hosts lên dòng rituals at the temple. The industry of making paper offerings has become a thriving business for many people including insiders and outsiders of Đạo Mẫu.

Another result of this commercialization of the worship is the emphasis on lavishness. The lên dòng ritual is a means to exchange a simple offering between worshippers and the Mother Goddess or ancestral spirits to gain spiritual support and assistance. In time, however the notion that the degree of spiritual support gained is a function of the offerings made became prevalent. And, the lên dòng rituals have become a “real business” or a “real good deal” that a medium can negotiate with Đạo Mẫu spirits. They often believe that the more costly the ritual is the better the responses from the spirits might be.

An example reported in the VietNamNet News (Thu Ly, January 22, 2010) tells how Đạo Mẫu mediums in Hanoi spent hundreds of million VND to organize their lên dòng ritual with an explanation that “the more money you spend for your Lên dòng ritual, the better your business is as well as the better you can keep peace in your heart and mind”. The reporter described how costly the ritual was:

The whole group goes to an isolated temple in Lang Son province (about 50 miles from Hanoi). People invited to participate in the medium’s ritual all fit in a 24-seat bus. However, the offerings for the ritual prepared by the host medium fill two other 24-seat buses. The costumes of the medium fill three big suitcases. Two husky young men sit in these two cars to protect the offerings and costumes.

Normally, for a wealthy medium, during the spirit incarnations she would distribute 5,000 VND bills or 10,000 VND bills to the participants, maximum is 50,000 VND bills. In this lên dòng ritual, the host mediums gave everyone 50,000 VND ($2.50 USD) bills and mostly 100,000 VND
($5 USD) and 500,000 VND bills ($25 USD) - the largest bill of VND. Friends of the medium got at least 10,000,000 VND ($500 USD) per person as “spirit money”. The bag of spirit-favor for each person attending was about 3,000,000 VND ($150 USD).

People in the temple neighborhood scramble to be in the ritual for some spirit money and spirit-favors, knowing that the spirit gifts made by the host medium would be large. One of the successful participants gaining a place in the ceremony is a 70 year old man who told the reporter he was hoping to get one bill from the medium as spirit money. He said the gift would be enough for several meals for his whole family. Because people scrambled in an unruly manner, the medium’s friends and family have to arrange some security guards to protect the ritual performers.

This commercialization has created a new career path for many Vietnamese women. For many people it is not a religious calling or a spiritual gift which motivates religious leaders, but an opportunity to make money.

Medium Chi and her three daughters are new mediums and they serve as good examples of the modern Đạo Mẫu medium. They became Đạo Mẫu mediums because they could get “big prosperous spirit-favors” (lộc lơn) under Đạo Mẫu spirit’s protection. Two younger daughters have shops at the open market where they sell paraphernalia and the goods used in the ritual practices, and displays. The mother and the oldest daughter have expanded their “business” to include selling lucky numbers [Chơi số đẻ] for the national lottery. These “modern” mediums say their success depends on luck. So, they need to have a lot of spiritual support. When I participated in a lên đồng ritual performed by the three daughters at the end of 2009, they all told me about their experience of getting a “big prosperous spirit-favor” after holding a lên đồng ritual. Thus, they always saved money to put on as many lavish lên đồng rituals as they can.
7.5. **The secularization as a source of soft power: the burlesques among Đạo Mẫu participants**

Blake examines the “burlesque” in Chinese popular religious practices, specifically in the burning of paper money, to identify changes brought about in modern times (Blake, 2011). While exploring how the modern influences have turned the paper money custom to a parody of the traditional custom he argues that the entertainment value and sense of frivolity and fun of the modern day practices is one of the reasons for its persistence and continued popularity. He observes: “Global-based consumer economics is penetrating the paper money custom via the new exotic offerings based on the possibility of unlimited desires”. So where in the past the ritual practice of burning paper money was practiced with constraint, although always with a sense of largesse, now the custom includes not only the burning of traditional replicas of treasured items, or modern “necessities” such as cars, TV sets, refrigerators, as well as money in different national currencies, but all kinds of brand named commodities, sex toys and weapons—it seems more in the spirit of frivolity, self-indulgence and impulse release than in the serious hope of sending these items to loved ones in the afterworld. In his interpretation, the burlesque is increasingly manifest in the vanities and fantasies, fads and fashions of modern desires. Suffice it to say that this interpretation suggests similar processes at work in the modern practices of the Đạo Mẫu.

7.5.1. **The show-off medium**

One of the effects of the modernization of Đạo Mẫu has been the creation of a new class of mediums—the show-off medium (đờn đa). The traditional worshippers of Đạo Mẫu often make fun of the show-off medium. This is because the show-off medium has no deep roots in the spiritual world and do not emerge because of a spiritual calling.
For these new mediums the choice to become a medium is essentially a career choice. They see that a medium in the modern world enjoys a fashionable and stylish lifestyle and it is this which motivates them to choose this path. In the other words, becoming a Đạo Mẫu medium has become a lucrative job for many of these show-off medium.

Most of the mediums I have interviewed are quick to distinguish themselves as the real/serious medium (đồng thuật) in comparison with the show-off medium.

Medium Han described a show-off medium:

When I was at a lên đồng ritual of H, I could not understand what she was doing. H was medium Ba’s niece. I participated in her ritual because of my relationship with medium Ba. H danced like the dancer in the Western movies while dressing like a Chinese princess. She borrowed money to host the ritual but she threw a lot of real money in the Royal Damsel spirit incarnations and gave so much money to the musicians, singers and the two medium assistants (hầu dằng). She cannot get support from the spirits. She is a show-off medium. My friends and I will not participate in her lễn đồng ritual anymore.

Medium Ha’s friend, Minh owns a private medical center in Hanoi. She makes a lot of money but was bored by her life --- her children went abroad to study; her husband spends little time with her as he is so busy with his company. She turns to the Đạo Mẫu, attracted by the beautiful costumes worn by the Medium Ha and her entourage at the temple. She decided to become a medium because she wants to dress in the stylish manner of other mediums and the temple performers. In time, Minh meets and takes a lover---a stylist and makeup artist working for the medium, and this further cements her connection to the Đạo Mẫu. Both are attracted by the lifestyle of the medium, and ask a master medium to help them become mediums.

When they became duly anointed they put on their lễn đồng ritual ceremonies with elaborateness and exuberance and with frequency. The show-off medium become caricatures of the traditional medium, and the ritual performances become devoid of any
spiritual meaning or significance. The temple becomes only a stage for a performance to show off the wealth they have and hope to get.

For Minh, although lênnông rituals are costly, it brings her a lot of happiness that she could not have before. She explained that she wants her ritual performances to be upscale and lavish so she can attract many worshippers and she believes that the numbers make her successful. Where the gifts or spirit favors given by the medium to worshippers at a lênnông ritual is usually something small, a token as it were, Minh’s gifts are extravagant and expensive. And, she expects the temple offerings of her ritual participants to be as lavish and expensive. What she expects from them is nothing less than overseas products (hàng ngoại) or imported items (hàng ngoại nhập) which are as lavish and expensive as her offerings. These imported candies, cookies, cigarettes, beers, etc, often cost double or more compared to the same product made in Vietnam. However, “overseas things are always better than domestic things” (đồ ngoại bao giờ chẳng tốt hơn đồ nội) as she explained.

Accidentally, I took my American friend to participate in lênnông rituals. At first, we were hesitant of doing this as we thought the medium would not welcome a foreigner. However, interestingly, I found out, with my foreigner friend, I have easier access to some mediums viewed as being very private and unapproachable. The mediums are so proud of having a foreigner participate in their lênnông ritual that we found ourselves welcomed to observe and participate in all of the activities. It seems to prove a point made by medium Minh about “foreign favoritism” (sính ngoại) among certain Vietnamese.

Medium Minh further explained:
Spirits nowadays travel to America, Australia or France where there are many Đạo Mẫu mediums, they know these products and they also like these products too. Unless you cannot find them, you should prepare the best you can to offer to the spirit. I always provide the best brand-name products. For example, I only choose Godiva chocolate or La Maison du Chocolat. For cigarettes I choose Three Three “333 cigarettes” made in London which you can only buy in an overseas duty free shop and brought to Vietnam as a “hand-carry” by travelers. If you are not experienced, people would sell you the 333 cigarettes were made in Singapore which is much cheaper.

For the desire of many new customers, paper offerings (hàng mã) used in the lên đồng ceremonies have also become modernized. Representations of paper money are burned as an offering to the spirits come in different currencies including US dollars, yen, euros, as well as current Vietnamese currency. Ritual offerings of different luxury items of every kind to pander to the spirits of the deceased now include cars, cell phones, watches, houses and jewelry. Ideally, of course, the items are luxury labels.

Medium Minh continued telling me about her preparation for lên đồng rituals:

My boyfriend’s mediumship root is to serve the Seventh Prince spirit. You know how this spirit can play and enjoy a “pleasure” life. So, we not only prepare big boat, strong horses but also the Mercedes car, even Boeing plane for him to travel faster and more comfortably. We bought Coach Watch and Bulgaria suit for him because he is a connoisseur of fashion and style. These “brand-name” paper offerings (hàng mã cao cấp) are often more expensive than “ordinary” paper offerings (hàng mã thông thường). However, spirits with good taste would accept and approve your sincere-heart (thành tâm) with more enthusiasm and give you your wishes a higher priority.

The VTC News reported on January 26, 2011, one week before Tet in Vietnam:

People line up crowdedly to make paper offerings for the Mother Goddess of Treasure at her temple in Bac Ninh. It has been a custom for many businessmen to visit the Mother Goddess of Treasure and borrow her money at the beginning of each year. At the end of the year they need to

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45 The Seventh Prince Spirit (Ông Hoàng Bảy) is well-known for his casual and debauched life. He often wandered around the nation, made friends, wrote poems but also smoked opium and had a lot of mistresses. Đạo Mẫu worshippers often consult with him on commercial issues and getting secret numbers for gambling.
go back and pay the Mother Goddess of Treasure what they borrowed plus interest.

The reporter described:

A company director hires trucks to carry paper offerings to pay the Mother Goddess of Treasure. There are about 40 trays of paper offerings beside his food offerings. His company borrowed many billion VND in the beginning of the year. Now he repays the Mother Goddess both capital and interest like a double amount totally. The repayment is made in paper money. The only real money is for people who are hired to arrange and decorate the offering --- about few hundred thousand VND (less than $50 USD).

Another worshipper from Hanoi said he borrowed 100 million US dollar from the Mother Goddess of Treasure in the beginning of this year. He is repaying her 200 million US dollar including both the capital and interest. In addition, he bought a lot of other paper offerings, such as jewelry, gold bracelets for her so that she could dress up for New Year festivals (The VTC News, January 26, 2011) (see figure 46).
7.5.2. **Medium factions (cơ cánh)**

As in modern day politics there is also a lot of favoritism within the ranks of Đạo Mẫu medium, and factions (cơ cánh) have emerged around popular mediums. Each master medium has her own faction. This cultish orientation has grown and nowadays, not only each temple has its own community, but also there are different factions in this community. Like political leaders, mediums of one faction often are critical of their rivals and the most severe criticism being to call them show-off medium or mediums who are “selling the spirit” (buôn thần, bán thánh). Some even distinguish themselves as “respectful and elegant” mediums (dòng sang bóng trọng) while calling these others as being “unconscious and dullish” mediums (dòng rồ bóng đại). This name calling gets
quite heated at times, much to the amusement of the worshippers and the horror of outside observers, who view this behavior of the holy people and representatives of the spirit world as sacrilegious. Of course, this criticism falls on deaf ears as the present day mediums don’t focus on a spiritual connection and divine guidance as the traditional medium did. Many operate in the manner of charlatans and fortune tellers, getting rich off the gifts given by the true worshippers and those people wishing to give offerings to get a big boon.

Interestingly, in this battle of words, everyone has their own way of defining “respectful and elegant” mediums and “unconscious and dullish” mediums. Some refer the former to the “old fashion” medium (đồng cổ) and the later to the “new fashion” medium (đồng Tân). Others refer to the former as being the “knowledgeable and conscious” medium (đồng tinh tảo) while considering the latter as “superstitious” mediums (đồng mê tín).

Many informants think that the argument whether who is the real medium (đồng thật) and who is the show-off medium (đồng duा) refers to a competition to be number One---in terms of popularity and not necessarily by efficacy in the granting of the wishes of the worshippers. The purity of the temples of the past, as being places where an individual can commune with the spirit of the Mother Goddess and the spirits of past ancestors, seems to be an aspect which is diminishing in the urban centers.

Sometimes, when mediums cannot afford to host costly rituals, they are viewed as mediums to be pitied for their lack of support and the modest offerings and ceremony (tủi đồng, tủi bóng). There is no admiration of modesty or poverty, only admiration of financial success and efficacy in achieving this. Many of these “pitiable” mediums do
occasionally use their poverty to advantage, decrying the ostentatious ceremony of rivals as being wasteful and displays not following canonical standards. They often call their richer sisters as those who are show-off mediums or mediums who are “selling the spirit.”

7.5.3. **Secularizing the role of Đạo Mẫu master medium**

In modern times the relationship between the mediums and their master medium has changed. For many mediums, the relationships seem to be business-partners rather than master/mistress and disciple. And, the neighborhood temples have begun taking on the appearance of franchised operations, perhaps a bit like a McDonalds or Kentucky Fried Chicken operation.

Prospective mediums nowadays choose their master medium quite carefully. Before, they were often introduced to a master medium through friends or relatives. If they felt comfortable they would start asking about the Initiation Ritual and get advice to become a disciple of this master medium. Master mediums were selected under certain criteria and character traits such as being a good person who had good family, not being divorced, having been well behaved and successful.

Nowadays, prospective mediums check on astrological and zodiacal references---the year of birth of the master medium was born, which element (among five elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth) the master medium favors in an effort to gain the best teacher to follow. Sometimes these references are cross checked with a fortune teller to see if the master medium’s age and element characteristics are compatible and make a good match with their own age and elements. Thus, for example, if the prospective medium was born in a horse year with a fire element, she will look for a master medium
born in dog or tiger year or carry wood element. Medium Ha explains: If it (the match between new medium and teacher) is not a good match you always have bad luck until you change your master medium. Sometimes, the prospective mediums just listen to the fortune teller and find their master medium according to what the fortune teller describes.

Medium Huong had two Initiation Rituals (lễ Mở phủ) during her ten-year of being a Đạo Mẫu medium. Normally, one only has one Initiation Ritual. She said she had a Re-Initiation Ritual (lễ Tái khóa) or the second Initiation Ritual because after her first Initiation Ritual, her business collapsed; her husband and children opposed her participation in Đạo Mẫu and a lot of bad luck came to her. She went to see a fortune teller and was told her problems occurred because she had an “incompatible” master medium and introduced her to a “good match” master medium. She finally had an Ending-membership ritual to “divorce” her from the first master medium and hosted a new Initiation Ritual or Re-Initiation Ritual to become a Đạo Mẫu medium again with her current master medium.

Đạo Mẫu worshippers often consider the temple where they have their Initiation Ritual or the place they often go to as their spiritual home (chọn tổ). However, some informants said it was difficult for one to be faithful with one’s spiritual home because the master medium sometimes changed their behavior or attitudes toward the worshippers. Aunt Din, a Đạo Mẫu ordinary worshipper told me:

It is common that when a master medium first opens her temple, she is nicer, more thoughtful and helpful. Later when her temple becomes more popular, she would behave differently. For example, it was more difficult to meet with her; the cost of her spiritual service can be increased.

Medium Ha described:

Some master medium treat their disciples unequally. The richer or higher social status can be treated better such as having priority to choose the date
for their rituals. During special occasions like anniversary months (tháng tiệc) or in the beginning of lunar year, many mediums want to host their ritual. Thus, the temple become like a theater stage to be rented. The mediums often pay their master medium a standard price for renting the temple stage and other ritual services. However, some people may give more money than others; they even gave money and gift not only to the master medium but also other people who worked at the temple. They are given the first choice. It was like doing a favor for people who gave a bribe.

Some Đạo Mẫu worshippers also said that their master medium want them to have people who worked at the temple prepare all offerings and feasts for their lên đông rituals. The host medium then gives money to the temple people for their work. In the past this work was mostly done by volunteers but modern times have changed all of this and some of the temples have become companies with paid employees.

Medium Bac said:

> It is like you have a wedding party at a hotel, you hire people to do everything and you only go there to be the main character.

Medium Han provided more details:

At some temples, to get permission to host the ritual there, you need to use the temple service such as medium assistants, musicians and singers. It always costs much more to have lên đông rituals here compared to hosting at the smaller temple. These are often important temples (đền to phù lơn) where every medium wants to host her ritual once in a while.

Despite the unfairness experienced at the temple, Medium Han rationalized the behavior of temple authorities in restricting use of a temple and charging a high price for its use as being human and should be accepted as such:

> It operates exactly the same way we live. We need to network and extend our network from time to time. To do so, you should visit the important people, introduce yourself to them and maintain the relationships.
The Đạo Mẫu temple thus begins to function as a community hall or a hotel, available for use for everyday life ceremonies under the form of spiritual ceremonies---provided you pay for its use and use their people to serve as caterers.

Medium Ha said, in 2010, she tried to host her annual ritual at master medium Ba’s temple. It costs three times as much as if she held the ritual at her master medium’s temple. She needed to borrow the money to do it. But she was philosophic about the extra expense incurred citing the benefits of being able to do so at a larger and more important temple. My conversation with her over the issue seemed to be the same as if I were chatting with a shop owner or a restaurant owner---it was essentially about location, location and location, and the premium prices to be paid or charged if you had a good location.

She provided one additional perspective on this issue when she shared her opinion that she also needed to expand her venue or place of operation so she could introduce herself to the spirit officials who often stay at the big and important temple. Her reasoning was that:

It is important to go to the big temple as it is to gain their support (the spirits residing at the big temple). If you don’t introduce yourself to them, how will they know about you in order to help you?

7.6. Conclusion

The practice of the Đạo Mẫu religion continues in the present day. The rituals and ceremonies remain in form, now sanctioned by the political authorities as a traditional folkloric religious practice --part of Vietnam’s cultural heritage. However, with modernization and adoption of the new technologies of the 21st century its spiritual content has been diminished. Not every worshipper sees it as means of connecting to the
spirit world, to seek the guidance of past ancestors, and a boon from the Mother Goddess. The temples can be viewed not as a place to seek solace and guidance, but a place of celebration, entertainment and making “a good business” with spirits.

If traditionally a lèn đòng ritual was used to convey a clear spiritual message, a lèn đòng ritual in contemporary times does not have a clear message. It could be transformed into so many different messages and values with full influence of ordinary and secular aspects. Despite the apparent denigration of ritual worship of the Đạo Mẫu with the advent of modernization and the impact of technological development, the change is apparent only. These changes make clear the new significance of the Đạo Mẫu which is found in the ludic spirit of Đạo Mẫu. I believe in studying cultural developments such as a folk religion we attribute more meaning and significance than what is intended or perceived by the worshipper. We impose a higher spiritual meaning to ritual practices and ceremonies and the act of worship. We, the scientific observer, impose this meaning on our assessment of the religion where the primary value---in the eyes of the worshipper, may be more compatible with that of the ludic spirit.

The analysis of this ludic spirit of Đạo Mẫu not only provides data on another province of the lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women but also explains the way in which it is manifested in Đạo Mẫu religious practices and is appreciated in the life of Đạo Mẫu women. In other words, this reinterpretation of the Đạo Mẫu as a manifestation of the ludic spirit of the Vietnamese people---the ability to take pleasure and enjoyment when one can, to endure privation with humor and the analysis of this ludic sprit can provide insights and rich data on the issue of empowerment and the spirit of the Vietnamese people, particularly among the Đạo Mẫu women. Ironically, the seeming degeneration of
the folk religion and its persistence and continued popularity, makes this value more clearly apparent to the observer.
8.1.  **Focus of the Study**

Present day Vietnam has been strongly influenced by the economic reform known as Đổi mới since 1986, along with the pressures of modernization and globalization. In the midst of these changes it was thought the country would move away from its traditional culture which is steeped in mysticism and follow a more rational and legalistic approach to social change. However, I have found that in contemporary Vietnam, some women---notably the women of Đạo Mẫu, have chosen to deal with the issues of identity and personal development by embracing the traditional values and the ways of Đạo Mẫu.

Mysticism and the possession by spirits in the worship of the Mother Goddess---have been for these women a vehicle of empowerment as well as a source of spiritual solace. The Đạo Mẫu, a traditional folk religion which has deep roots in the history of the Vietnamese people, has a strong impact on women especially in the ways it allows personal religious expression. The power of the Đạo Mẫu lies in its simplicity: it supports existent cultural values and does not seek to create an elaborate culture of its own; it has no elaborate theological structure to promote or proselytize; and its basis on a traditional belief in the existence of spirits, and the importance of reciprocity--express your appreciation of the spirits and please the spirits, and the spirits will help. This dissertation focuses on how Đạo Mẫu empowers the Đạo Mẫu women. And, how this makes Đạo Mẫu a potentially powerful and culturally sensitive tool in helping the Vietnamese people cope with everyday life problems as well as new issues of globalization and technological modernization.
Within the framework of their traditional roles as women, the women of Đạo Mẫu have transformed themselves to cope with the pressures of daily life and prepare themselves for a new role, as more self-determined and self-actualizing. My study shows that this transformation and empowerment has been from within--through personal development. This has come about as the women develop more awareness of themselves, and develop skills and confidence and a desire for independence and self sufficiency.

The women of Đạo Mẫu are not the passive preserver of traditional values as promoted in the aftermath of Đổi mới in the reconstruction and renewal of traditional culture and religious belief promoted by the state authority. By participating in Đạo Mẫu, these women gain a new persona. They can apply skills learned to coordinate and organize ritual ceremonies and activities to organize and manage their own lives better and take charge, rather than simply respond and cope. In the other words, the women of Đạo Mẫu through their religious practices not only follow the social norms supported by the state ideology but conduct and transform social controls as well as fulfill themselves from an individual idiosyncratic approach. The Đạo Mẫu religious belief and practice empower women by helping them develop their personal strengths, and coping skills, not by promoting social revolution or theological domination or radical change to tradition. It coexists well within an old culture with a long history of traditional values and a unique political social environment of Vietnam.

This study confirms the preliminary observations that Đạo Mẫu plays a significant role in the empowerment of its members. Participation in the ritual ceremonies and in other activities of the temple, and in the process of organizing these activities, and involvement in the communitas created by the members of Đạo Mẫu—all of these provide
opportunities for members to develop skills, create an identify for themselves outside of the family, and helps them meet needs for socializing and recreation. This in turn helps the women develop confidence in themselves and soft power skills and the ability to implement strategies of soft power. This helps them effectively cope with the obligations and expectations imposed on them in their daily lives and to live beyond the social norm.

The empowerment provided is not political, or economic, or legal. It is personal empowerment and to some extent spiritual empowerment. It comes from involvement in activities with other women and the development of support networks and networks of encouragement—a sisterhood, and it comes through spirit possession during the **lên đồng** ritual ceremony, where the power of the spirits (and the fear this generated) can be brought to bear to right wrongs and remedy situations.

Đạo Mẫu acts on its women in very amusing and surprising ways, as well as in expected and conventional ways. The impact of Đạo Mẫu make it possible for most of the women of Đạo Mẫu to respond to the challenges of obligation and expectation within the framework of traditional values and more. There is no militancy or social disruptions in the process of becoming empowered. This, I believe, is the strength of the Đạo Mẫu way—making social change within the traditional culture, not overthrowing the culture to bring about this change.

### 8.2. Summary of Findings

I have been touched and inspired as I learned more of the lives of my informants and the impact of Đạo Mẫu on their lives. They are all modern ordinary women but extraordinary in how they have coped with life and what they contribute to their families and community. My research and analysis show the women of the Đạo Mẫu do believe
that the practice of the religion has a significant impact on their lives and is the source of
their empowerment. This validates my original thesis.

In my assessment, one of the interesting dimensions of the issue of empowerment
of Đạo Mẫu women is in how this empowerment takes place or how the belief in spirits
works in the lifeworld of these women. The empowerment is internal, through personal
development. It is not empowerment by decree or law which is a kind of external
empowerment. Đạo Mẫu empowers women in terms of the skills the women gain--- the
skills and confidences are really what empower the women. However, these skills come
through involvement in Đạo Mẫu activities. So, in this way Đạo Mẫu empowers the
women. As identified in the testimony of informants and my assessment, the skills Đạo
Mẫu gives the women include: organizational and leadership skills, social skills, self-
fulfillment and development of personal pride, support network, spiritual power, financial
security and career options and self-respect and gender identity.

8.2.1. Empowerment through participation in the community of Đạo Mẫu

One way empowerment takes place is the conventional way---helping women
develop confidence and skills in problem solving, organizing and communicating through
involvement in temple activities and extending these skills into the outside world. For
these women empowerment comes from self development ---by being a member of the
temple community. Through their participation in the daily activities of the religion, they
develop the communitas---a social network, and a support network the women can turn to
for advice and help. This is a network of friends and sisters. These are people outside the
family that the women can turn to for material help and advice when they are confronted
by a difficulty situation. By giving the women a chance to manage the affairs of the
temple and organize the ritual ceremony they acquire skills and insights and confidence in themselves. All of these experiences develop into coping skills to help the women deal with the pressures of life put on them by the obligations and expectations of their culture and the government. The temple communitas then becomes a school or a place where learning how to deal with life situations takes place by interaction—more by doing and active management of the affairs of the temple and its ceremonies and festivals and pilgrimages, rather than by listening to lectures and presentations or readings.

The empowerment of the women of Đạo Mẫu also comes in the form of psychological support in helping create a persona and an identity for them outside of the family. It comes in the form of helping them develop confidence in working with others and develop leadership and organizing skills as an extension of their participation in temple activities. These are skills learned in the temple community, but which can be applied in the lifeworld of these women to cope with secular problems. Through their participation in pilgrimages they gain an opportunity to escape the pressures and stress of daily life, have fun with their peers, and in the process learn about themselves and become aware of their own hopes for the future. Most important the pilgrimage broadens their horizons for them by putting them in touch with other women. They not only broaden their horizons by travel and their awareness of different people and different places but also deepen their knowledge of their religion and traditions—giving them resolve and confidence.

8.2.2. Empowerment through spirit possession

The other means of empowerment is more unconventional and involves spirit possession and the power this connection gives the women. Empowerment also comes to
these women by the spiritual connection the temple provides through the lênh dòng ceremony. The women gain the advice and where appropriate, the intercession of spirits in dealing with a life situation. In some instances they can become themselves spirit possessed and transformed into an incarnation and can literally bring the “fear of spirits” as a means for disciplining a misbehaving family member or correcting a situation. This “fear of spirits” is a mystification for communal pressure or fear of community censorship.

Through their participation in the ritual ceremonies the women have gained spiritual power, and confidence and recognition (and appreciation) of their worth by their family and peers. This has promoted self esteem and self confidence. Since these activities are created by the worshippers themselves, they have also gained organizing and leadership skills and some opportunities for financial gain, by serving as mediums if they have this calling, and in business enterprises supporting the temple and the religion.

8.3. Significance of the Study

In this study I have sought to establish through personal interviews and participant observations how religious practices including ritual, pilgrimage and temple community lend individuals a sense of agency. Further, one sees how agency in religious practices creates roles and statuses in the lifeworld of the religious worshippers. The lifeworld of Đạo Mẫu women, imbued with ceremony, is a world of obligations—the individual is a nexus of obligations that produce and are reproduced through ritual processes.

The cultural premise (largely derived from Confucian Thought) underlying the practices of Đạo Mẫu women is that if every person honors her or his obligations that she or he produces and is produced by, the self is actualized and social relationships (society)
are harmonized. Within the nexus there is no recognized room for exercising that aspect of the self that is the agency of willing, the inner self so to speak. However, by performing the ritual and actualizing the outer forms that are the obligation, one is enabled to “go beyond the norm” or surpass the bounds of ritual form and to realize an inner self in its agency or willingness, an experience or exercise which we call “soft power.”

This soft power seems to be a phenomenon that Foucault does not discuss in his concept of power as a field. Soft power is not about compliance, nor submission, nor resistance. It must be somewhere amidst these western or Foucaultian categories. This study thus provides an understanding and appreciation of soft power strategies to addressing social issues as a Vietnamese approach to these issues.

In establishing the soft power approach in relation to contemporary Đạo Máu belief and practices I follow the ideas of Đặng Văn Lung: Despite a diverse background all of the spirits of Đạo Máu were viewed as manifestations of the Mother Goddess, sharing the essential qualities of the Mother Goddess. Thus, all possess the Mother Principle (Nguyên lý Máu) ⁴⁶ including the Yin Nature (Tính Âm) and the Mother Nature (Tính Mẹ) (Đặng Văn Lung 1991, 2004). With this, I support the reasoning of Rapaport’s perspective on the impact of ritual in developing cultural and religious values: “In ritual, logic becomes enacted and embodied - is realized- in unique ways” (Rappaport 1999: 3). Thus, soft power can be exercised relative to the social norm in a social formation or lifeworld that is ruled by ritual forms (Blake 2011). It follows from these views, which see social norms as not the only living guidelines for people but the

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⁴⁶ For addition information on the Mother Principle (Nguyên lý Máu), see Chapters 1, 3 and 5.
creation of obviation strategies or forms of soft power, the power exerted by 
representations of spirits of Đạo Mẫu women cannot be ignored.

The study suggests that there are alternative approaches to addressing social 
issues such as gender related issues. The soft power approach by which Đạo Mẫu 
empowers women is a viable way of bringing about change through personal 
development. It has the advantage of promoting change while maintaining traditional 
values. This is less socially disruptive than empowerment by law and more 
confrontational social revolutionary methods experienced in the US in the 1960s and 
1970s. It is an approach which is as effective as these methods for bringing about social 
change.

More important, the approach fits the culture of Vietnam, and does not require 
the overthrow of traditional values and culture and the social dislocation this brings. The 
approach---using a soft power strategy, should be considered by policy makers as being 
an effective approach to promote change in other venues. There is value in rediscovering 
old ways to solve new problems. Finding pride in ourselves and developing our own 
ways of addressing new social needs may be more effective than adopting the values and 
methodologies of other cultures.

Following the conception of “anti-structure” as the key tool for exploring the 
communitas of Đạo Mẫu women’s community (Turner 1972 and 1974a), this study 
discovers the communitas developed by the Đạo Mẫu community which has been 
effective in promoting skills development and personal confidence. As a part of soft 
power strategies, the communitas can be used as a venue for other socially beneficial 
activities. The communitas can be the base for development of community based schools
to promote cultural values and the traditional ways and high tech centers to promote 21st
century skills to adults such as computer skills and environmental awareness. It could
also develop child care centers and early education schools which have immediate and
direct benefits to families and the community as a whole.

The communitas could be the center of economic development within a
community and a business incubator through micro-lending ventures. This would
encourage the development of small business and financial self sufficiency of women,
and this will directly benefit the increasing numbers of women who are raising their
children without a spouse. The communitas can also be a vehicle for providing care for
the elderly and elderly indigent population by its creation and maintenance of care
facilities and hospice services. Community based public health and health educations
centers can also be developed and placed within the communitas to provide another set of
services.

The beauty of using the communitas in these ways is that we would be utilizing a
community organization which already exists and we are having them provide services
which they already provide, only on a bigger scale. The fact that the Đạo Mâu is non
denominational and very eclectic and open to anyone also makes the use of the
communitas appropriate and advantageous and makes it a vehicle for quick starting
community development. The biggest advantage of using the communitas in this way is
the benefit of using an existing organization of women to provide services essentially for
women and their families, by simply expanding the scope of the sisterhood. The
momentum and the commitment to serve already exists it is a matter of expanding the
range of activities. There is no need to waste resources in creating an infrastructure.
The study has also the important benefit of introducing other academic areas for future study. Soft power and its applications to understand the role of women and minorities in a larger venue, the role of ritual in promoting self-awareness, and “spiritual therapy” in addressing mental depressions, these are all topics worthy of further studies.

8.4. Implications and Future Studies

This study has shown that the women of Đạo Mẫu are less concerned about empowerment for political equality or social or employment or economic equality. They are more concerned about empowerment to cope more effectively with the demands of their lifeworld. Their focus is less on rhetoric and revolution and changing things and more on changing themselves and getting help to cope with the obligations of life imposed by family, society and government. In this instance, Đạo Mẫu serves its women well and offers a means for them to empower themselves in a socially accepted way and in a very effective manner.

This empowerment is different from that which comes with the establishment of laws promoting equality of opportunity and the banning of discrimination which is the common means of empowerment used in other countries. The kind of empowerment which I saw by observing the women of Đạo Mẫu and hearing their testimony is less about rights and more about the practicalities of surviving---with the help of the spirits. It has deep roots in the cultural traditions of Vietnam. Thus, there is no need for consciousness raising and promotion of awareness which was the major thrust of developments in other countries ---with the attendant financial cost and disruptive impact on personal lives and societal values.
This work suggests that there is much to be done in reexamining cultural traditions and roots to find culture sensitive Vietnamese solutions to contemporary problems and issues related to empowerment ---such as gender identity and issues of equity. I believe that cultural borrowing in promoting change for societal advancement has its advantages. But it also has disadvantages as well.

The dissertation explores how Đạo Mẫu works to influence and empower people. There is a magical element and a little bit of mystery in how this happens through collective spirit possession. The way to get to this subliminal state or the liberated state of mind becomes more important than getting there. The people who seem to achieve this state in the Đạo Mẫu always keep their feet in the real world and they come back, renewed and rejuvenated. It would be very different if one can never function well in the real world and prefer to be in the other world all the time.

It would also be interesting if we can look at the religious practice in comparative studies. There is a tradition in many other places such as China, Japan (Okinawa) and in Korea of women led religions and shamanistic religions. A comparative study to identify commonalities would be of interest and value.

Another point I have discovered but not yet fully thought out is the idea that there might be a deeper meaning and significance to simplistic ritual. While we often typically approach ritual from a rationalistic perspective and we conclude too quickly that it is simplistic and primitive. This study is showing that it may be more sophisticated than it appears---in speaking more to the unconscious than to the conscious mind, and more to the heart than the mind. In this interpretation, the Đạo Mẫu belief and practice present a practical living philosophy of Vietnamese that they don’t question or try to explain about.
the existence in their lifeworld. Instead of that they look for practical strategies to live better through strengthening living relationships and gaining support from a spiritual world. This can be the opening of the door for future research and work.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bàn hội</td>
<td>A group of Đạo Mẫu worshippers who belongs to a temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban phát</td>
<td>Dispense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bản sắc dân tộc</td>
<td>National identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban thờ Công đồng Tứ phủ</td>
<td>Altar of the Four Palace Spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biết nhưng nhìn</td>
<td>Being humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bộc dong, vỡ gối, thăng hoa</td>
<td>Super-passionate, super-generous and sublimated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buôn thần bán thành</td>
<td>Trading the spirit for benefit/ selling the spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cảm hóa</td>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Căn số</td>
<td>Destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Căn cao, sở năng</td>
<td>Heavy destiny root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Căn đồng</td>
<td>Mediumship root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Căn đồng bài</td>
<td>Fortune-teller mediumship root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chọn tổ</td>
<td>Ancestral place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chú nghĩa thần bí</td>
<td>Mysticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chớn lễ</td>
<td>Blessing offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cỡ cánh</td>
<td>Faction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cỡ día</td>
<td>Misfortunes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Có phúc mới được ông đông</td>
<td>It is fortune to serve the spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con cháu nhà Mẫu</td>
<td>Offspring of the Mother Goddess's family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con gái là con người ta</td>
<td>Daughters are children of another family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Con hư tại mẹ, cháu hư tại bà
A child turns bad because of the mother, a
grandchild turns bad because of the grandmother

Con nhang, đệ tử
Ordinary worshipper

Con trai con gái mà chỉ.
Con nào có nghĩa có nghĩa vẫn hơn
Why bother having son or daughter; whoever is
dutiful and loyal is better

Cung văn
Singers of Châu văn music

Tình chị em
Sisterhood

Dâu con, rể khách
A daughter-in-law is our daughter; a son-in-law is
our guest

Đã có mẹ là có cha
There is a mother means there is a father

Đả là phụ nữ đường nhiên phải là mẹ
Being a woman, of course one will be a mother

Đạo Tam phủ/Tứ phủ
The Religion of Three /Four Palaces

Đạo thờ Mẫu Tam phủ/Tứ phủ
The Mother Goddess Religion of Three/Four
Palaces

Đền to phủ lớn
Important temple

Đi lễ Thánh
Pilgrimage

Địa phủ
The Palace of Earth

Diễn/dền tự
Private temple/shrine

Đồ lễ
Offerings

Đồ ngoại bao giờ chẳng tốt hơn
đồ nội
Overseas things are always better than domestic
things

Đồ ngẫu
Medium

Đồng cảm
Sharing feelings

Đồng cổ
“Old fashion” medium

Đồng du
"Show-off" medium

Đồng mê tín
“Superstitious” medium
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Đồ ng rồ bóng đại</td>
<td>“Unconscious and dullish” medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đồ ng sáng bóng trống</td>
<td>“Respectful and elegant” medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đồ ng tân</td>
<td>“New fashion” medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đồ ng thật</td>
<td>True medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đồ ng thầy (Đồ trưởng /Quan thầy)</td>
<td>Master medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đồ ng tịnh tảo</td>
<td>“Conscious” medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đúc đồ</td>
<td>Righteousness and generosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gái lớn ai không phải lấy chồng?</td>
<td>How could a mature woman not get married?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghế</td>
<td>Shell/seat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giá động</td>
<td>Spirit incarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giá động (Hầu) trùm khẩn</td>
<td>Closed veil incarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giá động (Hầu) mở khăn</td>
<td>Openned veil incarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giá nợ tụ phú</td>
<td>Paying back the Four Palaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giáng</td>
<td>Descend/Hover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giáng bút</td>
<td>Spirit writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giáo hóa</td>
<td>Transform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giảm làm kép, hlep làm đơn</td>
<td>Prepare more if you have more and less if you have less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gọi hồn</td>
<td>Ghost calling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hàng mã</td>
<td>Paper offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hàng mã cao cấp</td>
<td>“Brand-name” paper offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hàng mã thông thường</td>
<td>“Ordinary” paper offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hàng ngoại nhập</td>
<td>Overseas products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hậu bóng</td>
<td>Service to the spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hậu dâng</td>
<td>Medium assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hậu đồng</td>
<td>Service to the medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hậu thành</td>
<td>Service to the spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hậu thì đễ giữ lễ mới khó</td>
<td>Performing the lên dâng ritual [serving the spirits] is easy but observing rites is difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hết sạch sành sanh mới được manh áo đỏ</td>
<td>Only when you lose everything, do you find your red veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hướng thiện</td>
<td>Incline to goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hòa đồng</td>
<td>Sharing the same thought and action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khăn phủ diện (Quà áo đỏ)</td>
<td>A face-covering veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiếp sau</td>
<td>Afterlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiếp trước</td>
<td>Previous life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lai lại</td>
<td>Giving partly (of the the worshipper's offerings) back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Làm dưng nghi lễ</td>
<td>Right liturgical order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Làm việc thánh</td>
<td>Do the work of the spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lạy Châu</td>
<td>Great Dame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lạy Mẫu</td>
<td>My Lady</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lạy quan</td>
<td>Great Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lễ cùng dâng số</td>
<td>Petition Submitting Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lễ cùng chúng sinh</td>
<td>Worshipping Wandering Souls Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lễ Tam sinh</td>
<td>The offering of three basic meats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lên dâng ritual</td>
<td>Going into trance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Linh cảm  
Premonition

Linh tài ngã, bất linh tài ngã  
To believe or not to believe in the spirits’ power depends on oneself

Lộc lớn  
Big prosperous spirit-favor

Lộc Mẫu  
Mother Resource

Luyện đông [bói]  
(Fortune-teller) Medium training

Mê tìn dị đoan  
Superstitious

Méo mó có hơn không  
Having any man is better than no man

Một ly một lai  
A little bit

Một miếng lộc thành bằng một gánh lộc trần  
One peace of spirit-favor is equally worth to a load of profane gifts

Ngày lành tháng tốt  
A good day

Nguyên lý Mẫu  
The Mother Principle

Nhân duyên  
Predestined affinity

Nhập hồn  
Ghost incarnation

Nhập hồn nhiều lần  
Multiple-spirit possessing process

Nhập vai  
Act a role

Nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô  
With one son you can record [a descendant] but with ten daughters you can write nothing

Nợ duyên âm  
Tied down by some relationships with spirits

Oan hồn  
Wandering souls

Ông Thánh có mất  
Spirits see through everything

Phạt tử bi lý sà, Thánh môn ly một lai cũng chấp  
Buddha is compassionate but spirits are very insistent

Phép Mẫu  
Mother Empowerment

Phúc đức tài mẫu  
Good fortune depends on the mother
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quả báo</td>
<td>Karma/ Retribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[phụ nữ] Quả lừa, lỡ thi/ế chồng</td>
<td>Women unable to find a husband</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quyền mẫu</td>
<td>Mother Capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruồng sâu trâu nái không bằng năm ngày đầu lòng</td>
<td>Good fields and strong buffaloes cannot compare with having the oldest daughter</td>
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<td>Sinh hoạt tín ngưỡng-văn hóa cộng đồng</td>
<td>Religious –cultural activities of the community</td>
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<td>Sinh ngoại</td>
<td>Foreign favoritism</td>
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<td>Só</td>
<td>Petition</td>
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<td>Số cờ quả</td>
<td>Lonely fate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tấm</td>
<td>Kindness and Compassion</td>
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<td>Tạo phúc</td>
<td>Create good fortune</td>
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<td>Thần chủ đến</td>
<td>Pantheon guardian-god</td>
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<td>Thần hộ mệnh</td>
<td>Fate-protecting spirit</td>
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<td>Thăng</td>
<td>Leave</td>
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<td>Thăng tiệc</td>
<td>Anniversary month</td>
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<td>Thánh biển mệnh</td>
<td>Destiny spirit</td>
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<td>Thánh dật</td>
<td>Spirit empowerment</td>
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<td>Thánh phật</td>
<td>Spirits’ retributions</td>
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<td>Thánh tâm</td>
<td>Sincere heart</td>
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<td>Thánh thử</td>
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<td>Tháo vạt, đam dang</td>
<td>Skillful</td>
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<td>Thất đức</td>
<td>Lose your moral</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thầy cúng</td>
<td>Ritual master</td>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>English</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thiên chức</td>
<td>Natural role</td>
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<td>Thiên phú</td>
<td>The Palace of Heaven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoát hồn</td>
<td>Spirit departing process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thù nhang (đồng đền)</td>
<td>Temple care-taker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thự nhất ngôi dòng, thú nhị là lấy chồng quan</td>
<td>The best happiness is sitting on the red mat to serve the spirit; the second is getting married with a Mandarin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thuỷ (thoại) phủ</td>
<td>The Palace of Water</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tiên Mẫu hữu Phật</td>
<td>Mother Goddess first Guanyin following</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiên Phật hữu Mẫu</td>
<td>Guanyin first, Mother Goddess following</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tiên Thánh (Tiền thất)</td>
<td>Spirit money</td>
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<td>Tiên vàng</td>
<td>Paper money</td>
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<td>Tìm Mộ</td>
<td>Searching for an ancestral tomb</td>
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<td>Tín</td>
<td>Devoting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tình âm</td>
<td>Yin Nature</td>
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<td>Tình Mẹ</td>
<td>The Mother Nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trần sao âm vậy</td>
<td>The spirit world (the Yin world) is similar to the real world (the Yang world)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trưởng thái trẻ thơ</td>
<td>Child-like status</td>
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<td>Trung tâm hòa giải</td>
<td>Peaceful center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tự ký âm thi</td>
<td>Self-suggestion</td>
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<td>Tự trừ</td>
<td>Four ritual assistants</td>
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<td>Tụi đồng, túi bóng</td>
<td>The self-pitying shadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tụng khăn phù diệnn</td>
<td>Toss the red veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tự tiền biến lễ</td>
<td>Offerings are made based on what one can afford</td>
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<tr>
<td>Văn hóa Thánh Mẫu</td>
<td>The Mother Goddess culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vàng mã

Xin dài âm dương

Xin lộc thánh

Paper offerings

Asking for spirit’s opinions using yang and yin coins to get the answer.

Asking for spirit-favors
APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: The Temple for Remote Worshiping of the King of the Eight Seas (Hanoi)

The Structure of the Temple and the Family House

1. Kindness Spirit
2. Cruel Spirit
3. Tiger Spirit
4. The Oven for Burning Paper Money
5. The Altar of Outdoor Mother Goddess
6. The Altar of the First Dame Spirit
7. The Altar of Boy-Attendant Spirit
8. The Altar of Royal Damsel Spirits
9. The Altar of General Tran
10. The Altar of Temple Leader's Family
11. The Ritual Master’s Working Table
12. The Lên dòng Ritual Stage
13. The Altar of Four Palace Spirits
14. The Altar of the Previous Temple Leaders
15. The Temple Drum
16. The Temple Bell
17. The Altar of The Third Dame
18. The Altar of Mountain and Forest Spirits
19. The Area for Preparing Offerings
20. The Altar of Four Dame Spirits
21. The Altar of three Mother Goddesses of the Nation
22. The Altar of the Nine Dame Spirit
23. The Altar of Four Empresses
24. The King of Eight Oceans
25. North Star Spirit
26. South Star Spirit
27. The Area for Welcoming Temple Worshippers
28. The Living Area of the Temple Leader's Family
The Temple Leader

The Temple Gate

Kindness Spirit  Cruelness Spirit  Tiger Spirit

The Altar of Boy-Attendant Spirit  The Altar of the Royal Damsel Spirit

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The Place to Prepare Offerings

The Altar of Four Dame Spirits

The Altar of Three Mother Goddesses

The Place to Welcome Temple Worshipers

The Nine Dame Spirit
APPENDIX II: Master Medium Vy’s Temple (Thai Nguyen)

The Structure of the Temple and the Family House

1. Gate
2. Temple
3. Family House
4. Kitchen and Space for Communal Meals
5. Parking Area

The Temple Structure

1. The Altar of Three Mother Goddesses
2. The Altar of Four Palace Spirits
3. The Lễ đòng Ritual Stage
4. The Altar of the Mountain and Forest Spirits
5. The Altar of Outdoor Mother Goddess
6. The Altar of Boy-attendant Spirit
7. The Altar of Royal Damsel Spirit
8. The Altar of Royal Damsel Spirit and Other Female Spirits
9. The Area for Preparing Offerings
10. The Mountain Spirit
11. The Altar of Guanyin
12. Landscape
13. The Oven for Burning Paper Money
The Temple leader

The Shared Gate of Family House and Temple

The Family House and the Kitchen Area

The Landscape in front of the Temple

The Main Door of the Temple

The Temple

The Resting Area for Worshippers
The Main Altar including the Mother Goddess of Mountain and Forest in the Center, King of Eight Oceans and General Tran and other Mandarin Spirits

Three Mother Goddesses

The Prince Spirits

The Stage in front of the Main Altar for Performing Rituals and for the Master Medium Works as a Fortune Teller
APPENDIX III: Praying Texts
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